

Feeling for Politics

the translation of suffering and desire in black and queer performativity

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Goldsmiths College, University of London
Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in sociology
September 2000

Abstract

This thesis is a study based in the lived experience of those defined both black and gay. Through analyses of performance work, I explore the interplay which creates white/black, straight/gay identity. I offer fragments of a historical account of that interplay and a critique of academic theories which, like my participants' performance material, work to understand the politics and processes of identification.

I look at a piece of work which draws on principles of feminist standpoint epistemology to engage us in political action – Patience Agbabi's performed poem *The Black The White and The Blue*, at the shift in feminism to queer theory and at drag, butch and femme experience and performance. In Valerie Mason-John aka Queenie's performance piece *Brown Girl in the Ring*, I see how race, class and gender politics are modulated together. I see the queer perspective as transcending standpoint epistemology in an analysis of work by the photographer Ajamu.

Judith Butler's Foucauldian theory of gender and sexuality is fundamental to my research. I build on it with thinking about raced identity and Pierre Bourdieu's theories of class. I also explore work on ritual and performance. Theorising identification as a complex and contingent intersection of processes, I bring ideas that work with the body and emotions to postmodern thought.

there exist multiple identities which should challenge
with passion and beauty the previously static order
Isaac Julien
Cultural Identities 1988

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Acknowledgements

There are so many people without whose help I couldn't have done this research that I can't possibly name them all. (None of them are responsible for any of the mistakes I made.)

Paul Gilroy more than anyone-else enabled me to write this thesis and has been a constant inspiration from the start to the finish of this project. I also warmly thank Vic Seidler, especially for the rewarding work we did together in my final year of research.

There are so many people at Goldsmiths who contributed to my work (and made my time there so enjoyable). Some of them are: Philly Desai, Les Back, Vikki Bell, David Silverman, Greer Rafferty, Jean York, Di Lockyer, Anne-Marie Singh, Hiroki Ogasawara, Kaori Tsurumoto, Angela Kerkhoff, Yoshi Mori, Roger Hewitt, also Maki Kimura (of the London School of Economics). My students at both Goldsmiths and Birkbeck and the Pacific-Asia Cultural Studies Forum were a wonderful first audience for much of the material which I present here.

I also thank Marilyn Strathern and Ros Gill for supporting my research to the ESRC for funding. I thank the Economic and Social Research Council who funded my research for three years, the Co-operative Bank who gave me a Career Development Loan to begin my studies and Hackney Council for giving me a home.

I would never have been the person who did this work without the love/commissions/challenges from everyone in Orientations, Valerie Mason-John, Nina Rapi, Toichi Nakata, Dorothea Smartt, Vanida Makkonen and Carmen Tundé Williams. Fred, Linda, Faye and James Sherriff, Ruth Whitehead, Eric Lewis, Alida Gersie and Sue Rennie were there when I needed them most.

Last and most I thank my family. My parents: John Pilgrim and Ruri Kumoi Pilgrim, my sororial mother-in-law Elizabeth Salter; my siblings: Sophie Pilgrim, Tom Salter, Nick Pilgrim and Roxanne Hakim; my nephew Adam Salter and my niece Ava Pilgrim; and, of course, my 'other' family: Tim Lissimore, Fran Canals and Alice Barnola.

Introduction

Feeling for Politics is about what people can create when they challenge with passion and beauty the previously static order. The lived experience of people defined black and gay is complicated. Between two or more communities; different in communities already marked as different; experiencing racism as well as kinship in gay and straight families; homophobia as well as collectivity in black and white cultures, this is a unique situation in the politics and processes of identification. *Feeling for Politics* is about how and why people choose to translate the “incorporated knowledge” learned in that situation through performance. It explores what that incorporated knowledge can tell us about multiple identities.

Those who are black and queer are subordinated. G.W.F. Hegel argues in *The Phenomenology of Mind* that identification takes place in a life or death struggle. He (sic) who is willing to risk his life, moves into a dominant position of identity – that of Master. The Master has power, but Hegel thinks the Slave has greater knowledge. The Slave understands not only his own position but that of the Master too. For Hegel, the Master’s consciousness is acquired through the Slave’s consciousness. It is this Hegelian Slave’s understanding which is conveyed in the performances I work with and with certain feminist schools I consider, known as standpoint epistemologies. Those who are black and queer are subordinated in a hegemonic discourse. In Britain today, white, straight, masculine, middle class and mentally and physically ‘able’ values are assumed to be natural. Those who are black are thought to be intruders, we should “go back where we came from”. Those who are gay are thought to be ‘queer’. Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1987-88 makes it illegal for children – even our own children – to learn to value our “pretended family relationships”. We live our lives against these ideas and when we describe them, we can only do so in that same discourse that is dominated by values which work against us.

For Hegel, the Slave may have greater knowledge but he is permanently trapped in his situation of slavery. Hegel sees this situation as not only inevitable

but proper. His work has both colonialist and racist strands. Although (like standpoint feminists), I take up the idea of greater knowledge gained through the experience of disempowerment and suffering, in this thesis I try to get beyond one of the corollaries of Hegel's concept: that it is not possible for people to convey the understanding gained from that standpoint to those in an empowered position; i.e. I argue that it might be possible for those in the situation of Master to come to a total understanding like that of those in the situation of Slave.

The performances I work with translate knowledge gained through suffering in what Isaac Julien calls a "static order". Like the Hegelian Slave's understanding, this incorporated knowledge considers identification from all sides: that of the Master as well. The "static order" is hegemonic. This means that black and gay knowledge is being communicated in a discourse which works against it. That knowledge must be translated into some form which can better convey what it has to tell us. My participants translate their knowledge through performance. Their 'queer' relationship to desire gives their performance work energy and optimism. They translate their knowledge of suffering in the hope for change.

Feeling for Politics draws on work like Patience Agbabi's performed poem *The Black The White and The Blue*, Valerie Mason-John aka Queenie's solo piece *Brown Girl in the Ring* and Ajamu's photograph *Black Male Body (Anonymous Negro Fetishist)*. It considers academic feminists' thinking on identification alongside butch, femme and drag experience. It draws out the reflections on race, gender, sexuality, class and (dis)ability in black and gay experience and performance and in academic thought.

I offer extensive analyses of these performance pieces, which depend on my thinking about a large body of work by people from backgrounds including African, Caribbean, South Asian and Pacific Asian cultures. Both before and during my research I have written about gay South Asian and Pacific Asian performance and some of this material can be found in my account of drag, butch and femme experience and performance. The three pieces I focus on are all created by people with African-Caribbean affinities, although the actual

experience of each is very different. Agbabi is Nigerian-British and was partly brought up by a white foster family. Mason-John grew up with white foster families and for a while with Barnardos. Ajamu's mother came to Britain from Jamaica before he was born, he grew up in a close-knit black community in Huddersfield.

These three artists and I worked closely over the several years of my research. (We all lived in London over that period. Being in easy travelling distance of my participants, and meeting them at events around town, was a factor, although I have tried to reflect on black gay culture outside London in my study.) Their work is representative of the richly informed and corporeal style of a black gay body of work which usually brings gay African-Caribbean, South Asian and Pacific Asian work together rather than separate them as culturally distinct. I chose the three pieces I work closely with because each one brings out themes of relevance to a certain stage in my thesis. (I wasn't attempting to theorise the whole British black gay performance scene.)

Many people would not accept me as a member of the black communities, some would even question whether as femme I am an 'authentic' member of the gay communities. I wrote this thesis on the basis of a decade's work in black gay cultural critique and in publishing collectives, of experience in gay groups and marches. I myself think of my perspective here as that of an insider. I was often understood to have a sensitivity towards my participants' situations because I share the same or similar experience, in what in this thesis I call standpoint epistemology. Some measure of trust was there because I too have experienced racism and pride in an Other culture, homophobia and 'coming out', although my analyses of my participants' work drew more on an understanding based on shared interests and ambitions that I would call friendship, than on one based in shared experience. Part of the thrust of my thesis is a queer understanding that I use to show how those in a dominant situation of power can also understand situations of disempowerment, so although the question of my standpoint is important in terms of the inflection given to my writing, it isn't crucial in proving the reliability of my research.

Black and gay performance and experience are uniquely placed in British culture, at that intersection where difference meets difference. I chose to work in this area where race, sexuality and gender politics are all highly visible, because I wanted to seek out an understanding which would manage them all without foregrounding one or subsuming some, which would comprehend each as different and yet show how they work together. (As I was working, it became clear to me that this model must also show how class and (dis)ability politics operate.) To gain such an understanding is crucial for those of us differentiated in difference.

Judith Butler's work was key in this ambitious quest. Although she denies the possibility of such an understanding in academic theory (Butler, 1993, pp.18-19), Butler is perhaps the first person to successfully articulate two processes of identification (gender and sexuality) and the way she managed to do so served as a model to me for the development of a theoretical field in which I could examine the operation of more than two processes of identification. In addition, the field of analysis which is known as 'performativity' in which I have been able to develop my thesis sprang into being around Butler's formulation 'gender as performative'. My thesis also developed in queer theory, in which texts by Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are regarded as foundational.

Performativity was opening up as a field during the time that I was working on my research. It is a particularly appropriate field for the development of my research because it is where studies of identity accidentally met up with ideas about performance. Here, cultural studies and the Classics, academic subjects from the gay origins of House music (Brian Currid in Case, Brett and Foster (eds.), 1995) to tragic proclamation in Sophocles' *Antigone* (Andrew Parker in Parker and Sedgwick (eds.), 1995) found fertile ground. Performativity sprang into being following Judith Butler's 'queer theory' and in particular her appropriation of J.L. Austin's concept of 'performative' sentences.

Butler has rejected a mis-understanding of her formulation 'gender as performative' which thinks of it as 'gender is performed'. However, when she took Austin's concept out of linguistics and brought it into gender studies and the

wider field of the study of identity, she brought it into a field where the body and politics were already acknowledged to be key. Performance is a realm¹ where the body and emotions are primary. Many writers (see especially Peggy Phelan) have also shown the primacy of politics in performance. The Foucauldian frame within which Butler works understands the ubiquity of politics but has been criticised for a failure to bring on board the body. It's here that performance can be important: not as a metaphor for the way in which any body can put on a fresh and freely chosen performed gender, but as actual performances – in which the body is always already present.

As I will show, performance can be an open space in which disbelief is suspended. In such space, discursive matrices of power such as those which constitute gender, race, sexuality, class, (dis)ability – which are normally invisible to us, we all unconsciously enact them as part of our daily being – can be made visible. For performances such as black or gay performances, which are often thought to be 'more' political because they assert black or queer perspectives in a white and heterosexual hegemony, this understanding is crucial in the development of an appropriate critical theory. For the sociological study of identity politics, this understanding opens up a realm for analysis in which the political dynamics of identification are unpacked and replayed.

As I remarked, the realm of performance is one where the body and emotions are primary. A similar realm, which has been explored in Euro-American based ethnographies of African, Asian, Australasian, South American and Antartica cultures, is that of ritual. I argue for recognition of the importance of ritual as a realm in which politics and processes of identification are constituted. These may range from gender (Butler, 1993, p.7 on the 'girling' of the human at birth) to racism (Back, 1996, on young men's ritual duelling play). I show how my participants are excluded from the ritual realm when identities like

¹ I use the term 'realm' throughout the thesis in a similar way to Bourdieu's concept of field. I wasn't keen on the way in which field lies behind *habitus* such that it suggests a surface of embodied practices generated by a deeper layer of cultural knowledge. This goes against Foucault's concept of one discourse. I think of realms as areas which I temporarily and artificially delineate in discourse. Sometimes I do use the term 'field' – usually to mean an academic field of work.

black masculinity are generated and iterated as heterosexual. My participants turn instead to a realm where they can consciously reflect on the politics and processes of identification, and can build a more appropriate sense of identity: the realm of performance.

In conducting my research, I always felt very conscious of working in a realm of emotions. The people with whom I work (and I myself) are subject to discrimination on many levels and for several different reasons. At one point in my research I became deeply frustrated at the difficulty of getting hold of my participants, who were often unable to sit down for a cosy, rational interview about their lives and work because they had been physically injured in attacks linked to prejudice or were too depressed by the struggle which their daily lives entailed. This level of suffering invites us to treat people either as social victims or as heroic figures in the battle against evil social forces. My participants (and I) are neither. We have had to work through to a deep understanding of suffering, but what prevents this understanding from becoming pessimistic to the point of nihilism is a parallel understanding of desire.

As women, as black, as working-class, my participants are 'body' in the Cartesian mind/body dualism² and are also associated in complex ways with sexuality and desire. We are the symbolic objects and markers of Desire: objectified if we are women or working-class, marked as (overly) sexual if we are black or gay. To be objectified and marked is problematic but desire is a creative force and my participants could celebrate its power. The poem by Patience Agbabi which I work with in Chapter Four describes how a racist policeman's desire for another man leads him to be queer-bashed, but also moves him (within the poem) from his own racist aggression into the loving embrace of an Asian man. Ajamu's photographs laughingly assert the black man not as object but as desiring subject; it is through actively desiring, rather than being prepared to die

² When Descartes came to the conclusion: I think therefore I am, he rejected sensual proofs of existence (body), choosing to rely solely on the rational (mind), (Descartes, 1647). A popular tendency to split the phenomenological world into two halves and associate one half with mind (male, white) and the other with body (female, black) has come to be called the Cartesian binary, or Cartesian dualism.

as Hegel thinks, that Ajamu's black male (*Black Male Body, Anonymous Negro Fetishist*) (1997) comes into subjective being.

The revelation of black masculinity as desiring subject rather than sexual object, and of masculinity as a copy copied by a butch woman rather than a natural production by the male body, is for Butler a subversive revelation. I argue that to confront race politics and hetero-normativity like the desiring black male and the butch woman, and make their artificiality apparent, is not the same as subverting them³. Subversion implies more than questioning the regulations, it implies a complete change – effected from within. For subversion to happen it takes more than the translation of experience into a form which visibilises unmarked power positions. Susan Buck-Morss describes the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic as a "moment" when such subversion did happen (Buck-Morss, 2000).

Buck-Morss argues that up till Hegel, European philosophers used a trope of slavery with no reference to actual practices of slavery, even though these were at that time supporting Western European economies. When Rousseau declared that man was born free but everywhere was in chains (1762), 20% of French families were dependent on a slave-driven economy, their income based on sugar plantations overseas, yet Rousseau made no reference to the conditions of actual slavery on plantations. He even argues that slavery and « droit » - right, but also law in French, are incompatible, ignoring the existence of the actual French law legitimising slavery the *Code Noir*. In contrast, Hegel does draw on the actual experience of slavery in theorising the Master/Slave dialectic. He was a regular reader of the influential political journal *Minerva* which was publishing articles on the slave uprising led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in Saint Domingue/Haiti shortly before he produced *The Phenomenology of Mind*. This revolution of actual slaves against the French, who had produced ground-breaking theory on man's freedom, was a crucible for the ideas of the Enlightenment. (One of *Minerva's* articles remarks: "the eyes of the world are on

³ I am indebted to Paul Gilroy for insisting that I examine whether 'subversion' is really what is going on here.

Saint Domingue”, cited, Buck-Morss, 2000.) For Buck-Morss it is this reference to experience; the actual experience of slavery, that makes Hegel’s model so powerful. Buck-Morss argues that subsequently Hegel turned to other academic work in developing his philosophical treatises, when his work became increasingly permeated by prejudices inherent in contemporary academia. I consider such a thorough-going change in Hegel’s work unlikely. Hegel’s work is always already marked by racist and colonialist strands of thought, making it problematic to rely on his thinking. Even if this is so, however, we can still see Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic in its drawing on the actual experience of slavery as a subversive moment. That is to say, not that the Master/Slave dialectic is subversive in itself. Clearly this isn’t necessarily so since Hegel himself didn’t develop it to argue for the abolition of slavery. However, his reflections on the actual experience of slavery in developing his dialectic give it a power which may work against the racism and colonialism inherent in his thinking. For a *moment* Hegel escaped from hegemonic discourse. From the position of Master, he managed to comprehend the Slave’s standpoint. From within the powerful situation of a European, he changed our understanding of subordinate positioning in a way which has assisted thinkers on black politics like W.E.B. Du Bois and the school of thought known as feminist standpoint epistemology.

Kobena Mercer describes a more intrinsically subversive “moment” in response to criticism of the Greater London Council’s “somewhat ragged rainbow coalition”:

was it any wonder the experiment failed given that *this was the first time it had ever been contemplated*.

Mercer, 1994, p.262 (Mercer’s emphasis).

My participants speak of the collapse of black gay community after the loss of GLC funding, but the performances I study have a confidence and pride which owes something to a decade of funded autonomous organising.

The performances I work with don’t usually offer subversive “moments”, since my participants are hardly ever in a position of social power which would enable them to have a significant enough effect on the workings of power for us to call it subversion. I will discuss how in comparison to the work of Robert

Mapplethorpe, which Phelan criticises for a “blissful absence” of women and the feminine (Phelan, 1993, p.60), black male nudes by Ajamu do acknowledge the feminine against which the masculine defines itself. However, I will focus on how black and queer performance can foreground subversion. The performances I examine look up from below (as Richard Wright put it), seeing not only our situation of disempowerment but also how those in power enact a powerful identity against the Outsider-figure which we are made into. They work in creative ways to overcome being “muted” in hegemonic discourse (Ardener, 1975). They utilise the open space of performance to translate and communicate knowledge gained in suffering and reworked through desire.

Trajectory of the text

I begin in Chapter One (Methods: Researching Multiple Identities) with an account of the methods and methodologies I used in collecting and interpreting my data. My thesis was produced within cultural studies but I also discuss classic social anthropology, which has fundamentally influenced my work. Because I am working in previously unexplored territory, I took a broad-ranging approach to the collection of data. (There was no previous history of a black and gay presence in Britain so I started to write one in order to contextualise my study.) In addition, I decided to treat in the same way my participants’ material and academic studies of the politics and processes of identification. I explain in this chapter on what basis I do so.

These decisions led to my collecting five different kinds of data, three of which were primary and two had a more supportive role. The primary forms of data were: archival and other historical data which I used in writing Chapter Three; academic studies of the politics and processes of identification; and project participants’ performance work. My analysis of the performance work is supported by ‘participant observation’ ethnography in what is my own community and interviews with project participants. I describe the contributions made and problems raised by each of these forms of data, and how I came to write up the material as the thesis which is presented here.

The people I work with are vulnerable to social exclusion and abuse on a frightening scale and exercising a rigorous ethical approach was vital for their protection. I describe what measures I took to protect both my participants and myself in relation to each method and also in a dedicated section.

In my second chapter (Performativity) I offer an account of the field of performativity in which I set my thesis. This relatively new field is one where analysis of the politics and processes of identification – especially Judith Butler's work on 'gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix' – has met up with analysis of performance. Here, I summarise the scope of this field, bring out the previously unacknowledged influence of anthropological theories of ritual on ideas of performativity and offer a definition of performance (along lines established by Peggy Phelan). I offer my understanding of Judith Butler's 'gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix' – a formulation of crucial importance to my thesis, and show how it can be generated and iterated in ritual. I use both classic anthropological accounts and recent sociological accounts to show the importance of ritual as a realm in which identity is produced. I argue that my participants (and I) are unable to take part in many of the rituals in today's Britain, in which an identity is produced through the repudiation of our own processes of identification, and I argue that we turn instead to performance.

Chapter Three (Background: His/Herstory) continues my argument that those who are defined black and gay are repudiated within hegemonic discourse. Using a Foucauldian approach to uncover fragments of a British black and gay history, I show how the black and the queer are constituted symbolic outsider figures to secure white and straight identity and also such powerful signifiers as 'nation' and 'family'. (I combine thinking drawn from Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida in order to theorise this process.) I describe how a symbolic figure of the black lesbian was at the centre of the New Right politics which Stuart Hall has called hegemonic, by which he means it makes itself not just a form of government but *the only* form of government. I also bring together accounts of the development of a black and gay awareness which foregrounds my participants' experience.

In Chapter Four (Patience Agbabi. From “Muted” Voice to Double-Voiced Discourse: Disclosing the Undiscussed), I provide an analysis of Patience Agbabi’s performed poem *The Black The White and The Blue*. I show how black and gay performance succeeds in communicating knowledge of the politics and processes of identification in spite of working with a “muted voice” in hegemonic discourse. I discuss how Agbabi utilises what we might call a black feminist standpoint approach to try to shift understanding of racism onto the white policeman subject of her poem. A biographical account of Agbabi’s life contextualises the poem and also adds to our understanding of black and gay experience in Britain today. The chapter develops a black and queer cultural critique within which to better appreciate *The Black The White and The Blue* as situated in particular traditions. Using sociological theory supports an understanding of black British performance as politically informed by experience and drawing on many cultural influences.

Chapter Five (Multiple Identities) moves to develop further an understanding which can theorise what Butler describes as the full complexities of contemporary power (Butler, 1993, pp.18-19). In a critical account of different feminist approaches, this chapter finds it is possible to theorise multiple identities on the basis of personal experience as do the Hegelian-influenced schools of feminist and black feminist standpoint epistemology. However, to be able to do so only on the basis of personal experience is politically dissatisfying (these approaches don’t offer opportunity for subversion, since they come from that position which Hegel identifies as one of greater knowledge but no power). I put forward some feminist accounts which succeed in managing such theoretical analysis on a different basis. I suggest they do so by refusing to reify subject positions for analysis, concentrating instead on the dynamic process: a Derridean supplementarity, which creates those subject positions. I argue that these accounts of identification are developed in an ‘arena’⁴, like my participants’

⁴ I use the word arena to suggest the arena in which performance might take place, which my participants use as a ‘space apart’ in which to translate their incorporated knowledge about identification, and which is therefore similar to a ‘space apart’ in which feminists are working out ideas about identification.

understanding, which is developed in the 'arena' of performance. These (and other feminist accounts) are in danger of reifying categories of butch, femme and drag identity. In a return to project participants' performance and interview material, I show that when these are respected as diverse and mobile processes of gender as performative, a fuller account of the way in which class, race and sexuality intersect with butch, femme and drag (gender) emerges.

Chapter Six (Valerie Mason-John. *Studies of Race and Class*) draws on an extract from Valerie Mason-John's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, and some academic studies of class politics to continue the development of an understanding which theorises the full complexities of contemporary power. An academic dissatisfaction with Marxist analysis of class politics leads to a more fruitful exploration of Pierre Bourdieu's theories. An account of British literature and performances which combine ideas about race and class place this piece in particular literary and performance traditions. The dynamics exposed in the extract from Mason-John's performance reveal how the politics and processes of race, class and gender may intersect to hide and support racism, classism and sexism. It becomes abundantly clear that processes of identification can only be understood in the context of other processes of identification, and not as singular entities. I offer a biographical account of Mason-John's life to contextualise her work and develop further an understanding of the lived experience of being black and gay. In particular, I explore the influence of childhood discourse on the politically active person.

In Chapter Seven (Ajamu. *Thinking of Bodies*) I examine four pieces across a decade of work by the photographer Ajamu. Through biographical accounts, I explore Ajamu's experience of ritual realms of black masculinity such as music and body-building, and the way in which the body was made central for him in his life and work. In a comparison with the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe through ideas about fetishism, I describe how – like the feminist academics in queer theory – Ajamu refuses to objectify/reify/fetishise the subject in his photographs, producing instead portraits of actively subjectivated individuals. In this chapter I develop the exploration of queer theory and activism

which I have been making in the thesis, suggesting that queer offers opportunities for a deeply humanist understanding of others through which we might achieve the subversion Butler desires.

In my Conclusion I summarise the findings of my research and the contributions it makes to knowledge of the subject. I outline further projects which could be developed from this piece of research and suggest ways in which the philosophical and political project outlined in my account of queer might be pursued.

Chapter One

Methods: Researching Multiple Identities

Le document n'est donc plus pour l'histoire cette matière inerte
Foucault, 1969, p.14.¹

In this chapter, I will offer what David Silverman would call the “natural history of my research”² (Silverman, 2000, p.236). I describe how my research project developed in order to reach an understanding of why I have done it in the way it has been done, and partly also to show that my research has been conducted along principles acceptable to the science of sociology, that it is ‘valid’, in Martyn Hammersley’s sense:

By validity, I mean truth: interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers.

Hammersley, cited Silverman, 2000, p.175.

In the spirit of Foucault’s archaeology (Foucault, 1969), I have sought to uncover continuities and discontinuities in ideas of the past and present. I have done so through a little considered perspective: that of those who are often excluded from the official history we unfold on the grounds that we are black and queer³. A project conducted on the lines of Foucault’s archaeology is not, of course, valid in the same way as a project conducted on the positivist lines along which Hammersley thinks, but a concept of validity remains important to any research drawing, as mine does, on empirical data. A research project “in the postmodern” (Scheurich, 1997) has to reflect more, rather than less, on bias and personal standpoint because, rather than in spite of the fact that postmodern thinkers reject a fixed concept of ‘truth’. Since a postmodern thinker can never

¹ “The document, then, is no longer for history an inert material” (trans. Sheridan Smith, 1972, p.7)

² The word ‘natural’ is one which I have learned to treat with suspicion in both the classic anthropological training of my first degree – structuralist analyses of a nature/culture binary – and postmodern perspectives in my postgraduate training – natural, original and all such terms as merely rationales in social discourse rather than unquestionably *a priori* facts of life. Silverman means here the opposite of ‘natural’ as an assumed origin, for him a ‘natural history’ is a deconstruction of how the project was built up.

³ Black and queer as political terms for those excluded, rather than as terms denoting fixed communities of a racial, ethnic or sexual character, as I argue in § 1.1.

assume h/er position is one of neutral truth and innocence, s/he must always interrogate what it is.

I began my project with a hypothesis drawn from work I had done for an account of British black lesbian literature (in Mason-John (ed.), 1995). My research on black lesbian and gay writers and artists for that chapter and for articles in the gay press showed that not only did those artists work extensively on questions of what we might call identity politics, they came up with analytic accounts of the processes by which race, gender, sexuality operate, of relevance not only to those aligned with them on the black or queer side of those politics but also to those defined white and straight. I became interested in uncovering continuities and discontinuities in ideas like racism, black power, anti-racism; concepts of the metaphors of race (as a floating signifier – Mercer, 1990, Hall, 1996) and gender (as performative, Butler, 1990), the discourse of heterosexuality in which those metaphors are embodied as practices. The work of those defined black and queer offers a medium through which such continuities and discontinuities are being uncovered. Moving onto performance from literature gave me “documents” which were definitely not “inert material”. In performance work, the body is a primary force in a way in which it need not be in books.

It was for many reasons difficult to research the lived experience of those who are defined doubly, trebly, or in multiple ways ‘Other’. Finding a supervisor able to respect my topic as a proper academic study took a long time. Both before and throughout my project, I have often met with blank astonishment (if not worse) when presenting my work (although I have occasionally met with a truly encouraging recognition of the possibilities offered by a field marked by difference in multiple ways and have been lucky enough to find an ethos of intellectual and personal support in my own department). The African-American lesbian poet Audre Lorde entitled one of her collections of poetry *Black Unicorns*, reflecting the way in which many regard those who define black and gay as impossibly fabulous. It was hard to track down the few books which do begin to

work in this field. I had to rely on friends' recommendations rather than computerised bibliographic searches, as books were never catalogued as black and gay but rather according to what were thought of as separate fields of work.

Studies of identity politics are conscious of a tendency to compartmentalise: race studies, gender studies, queer studies, the Marxist analysis of class relations. In order to work with people whose lives and work should be housed in at least two and usually more than two of these fields, I needed a framework which would contain all of them. It was as if at the start of a journey, a gleaming machine lay in several parts at my feet. Fortunately, my work has developed at a time of efforts to debate and do more incorporative research (e.g. Back 1996, Brah, 1996, Mac an Ghail, 1994, Skeggs, 1997). In spite of her arguments to the contrary, I think this process was kick-started by Judith Butler. Her formulation 'gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix' showed for the first time two different modulations of power: sex/gender and sexuality, articulated together. This formulation and the theory within which it developed, which Theresa de Lauretis christened 'queer theory' (de Lauretis, 1991), are crucial to my work. (I develop an account of the impact of queer theory and politics on my work throughout the thesis.)

In addition to these difficulties, access to participants could be extremely problematic. There were occasionally problems to be got over on the question of who might define 'black' and include themselves in my study. However the most difficult problems were around sexuality. Some people were, not closetted but reticent about their sexuality. Many performers are working to avoid being categorised as black or gay artists; struggling to force recognition of their work outside funding and exhibition criteria which will respond to it only on those terms, and they were understandably reluctant to figure in a study like mine. It was also critically important for me not to make assumptions about people's identification, which I yet had to make in order to try to identify informants. Asking a feminine woman known personally by me to be in a relationship with another woman if I could interview her for my work on femme identity (see Chapter Five) might lead to my being angrily rebuffed if she didn't actually define as femme. If I

got these basics wrong I usually lost the chance to interview at all. Some people were closeted. If they dared not give me their contact details and could only rarely find enough privacy to call me, negotiating an interview would take weeks even if we succeeded in finding a place both private enough and safe enough in which to talk. My flat – on a housing estate where I knew gay-bashing had occurred, or Goldsmiths College – situated in an area where violent assault has recently been known, were not places which I felt comfortable about asking those at risk of being read as transgressive (such as drag queens) to visit.

The core data I draw on in writing this thesis arose in an organic process from my work, and was supported by data I collected through more focussed 'fieldwork'. My data can be divided into five kinds. When I started I had a wealth of ephemera (flyers, newspaper articles) and personal experiences (recorded in diaries, articles I wrote, notes of interviews I had made but hadn't published) which were part of my life (I discuss how I treated this material in § 1.2 Ethnography). Secondly, I write about publicly performed pieces, some of which I had been interested in for several years prior to my starting a PhD programme. These were for many reasons particularly appropriate for this study. I already knew a great deal about them. While I was conducting my research, the idea of 'performance' (and related ideas such as performativity and the importance of the body) was increasingly being regarded as a kind of *point d'appui* (fulcrum) for fertile sociological thinking (for example see Thomas (ed.), 1997.)

Using only interviews to uncover the operation of race, gender, class politics had two implications I wanted to avoid. In an interview-based approach in this area it would be hard not to be drawn into exploring the dynamics of identification through narratives of suffering and the assertion of pride in the face of suffering. Suffering is a pernicious reality for those defined black and queer, but it may obscure what is at work in a politics of identity if it is also made a conceptual part of a theoretical framework of understanding. Secondly, if there were another source of readily available data, I felt it wasn't responsible to put project participants (and myself) through the gruelling procedure of recounting traumatic experience in which a politics of identity may be revealed.

Performance material is not quite what David Silverman has in mind when he recommends us to look for “naturally occurring data” rather than risk disrupting people’s lives in order to add to what may already be vast reserves of information available for analysis. However, it is readily available, relatively unproblematic to access, and richly informed. The performed pieces I work with are conscious attempts to engage with exactly the questions I wanted to address. They consciously utilise and refer to the body, and I wanted to address issues of the body. They are already in the public realm and so in referring to them I’m not exposing private accounts in a hostile society; the decision to ‘come out’ has already been made by the artists concerned. In addition, my critical accounts of the work give something back to the artists, who work in an environment where critical support is rare and marked by racism, sexism and heterosexism.

Through interviews with the artists I explored my analyses of performances further. (Talking about the artists’ often traumatic experience of the politics of race, gender, class, sexuality, as presented in their work, rather than addressing that experience directly, allowed emotional distance from the experience. It addressed both the experience and my participants’ working through of that experience.) These interviews, supplemented by written material such as C.V.s, also provided biographical data. I also sought data in primary and secondary literature and archives which would provide a historical context for the research project as a whole. Although this is properly the subject of a study in its own right, I felt it was necessary albeit in a fragmented form for a better understanding of how those who are defined black and queer are placed. Without a contextual account, readers might not understand the political pressure and historical weight of racism and homophobia in Britain; the circumstances in which the work I explore is created. Finally, as my research developed, I collected a number of academic accounts of the politics and processes of identification which I decided to treat as data.

These five kinds of data: ethnographic data, performance pieces, interviews, historical data and academic accounts, fall into two categories. Performance material comes from a lived black and gay experience, and

together with academic accounts formed a primary pool of thinking. This was supported by interview and ethnographic data (also coming from a lived black and gay experience). Historical data helped offer the context for that lived experience. This is a sociological rather than an arts thesis, and my principle aim was to explore the dynamics of race politics, gender politics, class politics which operate in British society today and within which those defined black and gay are subjected and subjectivated (Butler). I used analysis of newspaper articles in particular to prove the relevance of thinking from black and queer perspectives to wider social/discursive formations. Reports on two people who had been publicly identified in a range of newspapers and magazines as black and gay offered insight into how the black and the queer are positioned in contemporary social values.

My participants have thought long and hard, often through undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses, sometimes in academic papers on their own lives and work, about the politics and processes of identification. The process of 'coming out of the closet' as gay involves first coming out to yourself and this means conscious reflection on what sexuality is. Experience of racism often – although not always – provokes us to work out what race politics are, why the racist experience happened. Black gay people are passionate about identity. Given this extent and kind of knowledge in my participants, it would be difficult to set up an academic body of thought as a separate field against which to examine the understanding of identification which the performance material conveys. Sometimes, academic studies were racist or heterosexist (e.g. A.L. Rowse's study which I discuss in Chapter Three), offering a useful example of the operation of hegemonic discourse rather than an account of processes of identification. I decided to treat academic studies and performance material in the same way as data which works towards an understanding of identification. That doesn't mean I think they are the same and I wasn't trying to show that performance material brings out ideas about identification better than academic theory. Performance conveys an emotional sense of identification but in the rational realm of academic thought, this can be deconstructed for analysis – as I

do in my study and as other academics do in work that my participants draw on. Setting the two side by side for analytic inquiry clarified both. Chapter Five in particular discusses ways in which academic feminist theory succeeds better when it works in ways that are similar to those of performance.

When I began my research, I intended to do a semi-ethnographic study of a black and gay community embedded in post-industrial British society. I meant to draw on my training in social anthropology to provide a study of a particular 'community'. However, I came to feel that the process of defining such a community would also create it; and that this wasn't the proper job of an academic thesis. Those who define themselves or are defined as black and gay often collect in particular organisations: peer support groups, politically dedicated publishing houses, or at particular events: club nights, poetry and music events, sections of Gay Pride marches. To think of a black gay sub-culture is correct, but only half the story. Black gay men and lesbian women have historically tended to organise and socialise in a markedly separate way. There is no geographical space which can be thought of as black gay space, black gay people tend to occupy two (or more) spaces, e.g. Londoners might live in an area of high black settlement like Brixton and socialise in a gay space like Soho's Old Compton Street. It might be an overall loss rather than a gain to give up those spaces in order to establish a separate black gay space (although efforts have been made to create black lesbian and gay men's spaces). We maintain relations with many other parts of that fragmented network making up a post-industrial society: the black communities, the gay community; people in a capitalist framework of employment, government bodies for the unemployed, shops; with our predominantly straight families; with white gay partners, friends and relatives. Some lesbian groups have succeeded in living according to a separatist agenda but although this was spoken about as a solution in black and gay circles, I'm not aware of any actual community that was established. To focus on black and gay 'community' as experienced in clubs, bars and politically motivated support groups rather than in the context of everyday living experienced in wider society might give a distorted picture of an underground

movement. When members of that 'community' move freely in British society, engaging in more widely based commercial, social and intimate relationships, they become invisible to such a study. In particular, an ethnographic study conducted in clubs and bars might lead to a distorted emphasis on sexual activity in a black gay sub-culture already over-identified with an exotic and excessive sexuality.

By "*imagined communities*" (Anderson, 1991, my emphasis) Benedict Anderson meant nations. Those who are defined black and gay are more part of the imagined community of Britain than a separate imagined or actual community. If as Paul Gilroy has shown, black presence is inherent in the project of modernity (Gilroy, 1993a), and as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have shown, the repudiated homosexual is crucial in the hegemonic project of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990, Sedgwick, 1990), then the black-and-gay⁴ can hardly be treated as an incidental, self-contained community inside Britain.

I turned to performances. Here, black gay people were presenting their lived experience, politics and philosophies, in relation to wider networks of which they are part. Instead of ethnography, I used discourse analysis. (I use a broader idea of 'discourse' than that of Jonathon Potter and Margaret Wetherall's classic accounts.) However, my project was supported and marked by ethnography in ways I discuss here. Both my use of ethnography and my use of discourse analysis were inflected by the epistemology of cultural studies, which I will also discuss below.

1.1 Definition of key terms: 'black', 'gay' and 'queer'

In this study I sometimes use the term 'identity' to describe identities that have been fixed in political processes but I think more of processes of identification. The physical facts of "color, hair and bone" which W.E.B. Du Bois set aside in favour of examining forces dividing us into groups (see Appiah, 1986), the materiality of sex which Butler questions, are only of interest to me

⁴ See Harding, 1986 and Haraway 1985, reprinted in Haraway 1991 on the hyphenising/fracturing of identities.

because they are points to which symbolic nodes are anchored. The way in which women, or black people, or gay people are figured symbolically in a political realm where fears of criminality or disease are projected onto 'them' in order that 'we' can feel secure is what I want to study. I therefore use the terms 'black' and 'gay' to reference a wide range of people who are repudiated in hegemonic discourse, some of whom would not define themselves as 'black' or 'gay' but who are so defined by the white and straight.

Les Back (1996) and Avtar Brah (1996) give full histories of the term 'black' and Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta (1993) give a careful account of its significance in black lesbian circles (arguing for an inclusive usage of the term). Under the influence of more sectarian politics from the United States, the term has become one which does not include Asian communities but initially in Britain 'black' was a coalitional term, bringing together Asian, African, Caribbean and Jewish (and in some cases Irish) communities to protest against racism. Since most accounts of race politics written at these times in Britain have used the term in this way and many black organisations were set up on these lines, it is difficult to write a historical account of race politics in Britain without reflecting this usage. Black lesbian discourse is particularly rich in thought on the dilemma of recognising the specifics of identity within a coalition (see Choong et al, 1987, Grewel et al, 1988 and Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993) and black gay events have been characteristically organised in terms of coalition rather than separation. The history of the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre (London) is a case in point.

In 1980, a Gay Black Group was formed in London by men of African and Asian descent (on one occasion the group published a letter signed in the name Gay Asian Group). This group became the Lesbian and Gay Black Group which founded the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre in London in 1992. Originally, the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre offered membership to those who were:

descended (through one or both parents) from Africa, Asia (ie the Middle East to China, including the Pacific nations) and Latin America, and lesbians and gay men descended from the original

inhabitants of Australasia, North America, and the islands of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean

cited, Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993, p.9.

People like Savitri Hensman (defined in Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993 as black but also born: Sri Lanka, parents: Sri Lanka), have been instrumental in establishing and running the Centre. To use the term 'black' only to refer to African-Caribbean experience would risk losing the full richness of this history.

The term 'gay' has also been rejected as a broad definition. However, this is not in a movement to restrict political references of the term to gay men, rather lesbian women protested at feeling the term 'gay' didn't reflect our presence in groups and community centres. From the 1980s, a politicised bisexual movement, and in the 1990s, trans-gender activists, also called for named inclusion. The demand by lesbian women for named inclusion offered the opportunity for debate about feminist politics (or rather the lack of feminist awareness) in circles dominated by gay men. However, the demand for named inclusion by bisexual, trans-gendered and transvestite people led to debate about the definition of 'gay'.

I use the two terms 'gay' and 'queer' in my thesis to refer to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-gender, trans-sexual and transvestite communities. Sometimes I speak of people as 'defined queer' to reference explicitly the way in which hetero-normative discourse uses the term 'queer' with negative implications to constitute a category of people which can be repudiated. 'Queer', like the term 'black', has been turned – repossessed with pride by queer activists (subjected to reverse discourse, Foucault would say). It has become one to celebrate rather than repudiate.

A narrow exclusionary use of the terms 'black' and 'gay' (-and-lesbian), and political repercussions, can be compared to the broad inclusionary use of the term queer. Although gay and lesbian activist politics dates itself from a riot by drag queens in the Stonewall Bar in New York (June, 1969), groups like Britain's Stonewall Group work along the lines of the slogan "Good As You", i.e. we deserve the same rights as straight people because we are just like them. This excludes certain people: drag queens, butches, femmes, the gay sado-

masochist community, and makes the inclusion of black gay men and lesbian women problematic (in a society in which racism is normative). In reaction to the assimilationist politics which excluded more outrageous elements of gay communities, some made a more assertive claim along the lines of the slogan, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it". The term queer has been broadened:

Queer means to fuck with gender. There are straight queers, bi queers, tranny queers, lez queers, fag queers, SM queers, fisting queers in every single street in this apathetic country of ours.

from activist leaflet cited by McIntosh, in Bristow and Wilson (eds.), 1993, p31.

This makes queer not a matter of standpoint, but one of inflected experience. It escapes the trap of an eternal (white) liberal guilt, offering instead the labour of politicising experience through irony, whether that experience is straight or gay, black or white.

1.2 Literature

There are only six or seven books which could be thought of as referring to a British black and gay experience⁵. It was difficult to track them down, they were never catalogued as that impossibly excessive⁶ category black-and-gay and rarely as dealing with sexuality in any shape or form. For example, the Library of Congress considers that Kobena Mercer's *Welcome to the Jungle* is about African-American and black British modern art⁷, while the British Library describes Máirtín Mac an Ghail's *The Making of Men* as about education, masculinity, sex differences and sexism even though its sub-title reads "Masculinities, *sexualities* and schooling" (my emphasis).

The earliest attempts to document a black-and-gay presence in Britain are scattered papers mostly by the academic and cultural critic Kobena Mercer and the film-maker and cultural critic Isaac Julien (sometimes writing together). It

⁵ I chose not to refer to American black and gay material because I wanted to concentrate on British experience.

⁶ Excessive in the sense that Butler means when she describes some identities perceived to be 'excess', when their very human-ness comes into question (Butler, 1993, p.8).

⁷ There is a sense in which this is correct, in that Mercer talks extensively about black gay politics and art as a proper part of black politics and art.

was Mercer, together with Errol Francis, who wrote perhaps the first article from a black queer perspective “White Gay Racism”, published in *Gay Times* in October 1982 and signed in the name of the Gay Black Group. A 1985 study was made for the Greater London Council on “Lesbians from Historically Immigrant Communities”, but it isn’t publicly available so far as I am aware. A number of accounts by lesbian women were published in anthologies of black women’s writing during the 1980s, such as *Charting the Journey* (Grewel et al, 1988).

In *Young, Gifted and Black*, published in 1988, Mac an Ghail gave accounts of young black gay men and in *The Making of Men* (1994), he continued to examine the articulation of gender and sexuality (along the lines of Butler’s thinking) in the context of ethnic identity, in the secondary school education system. Several of Mercer’s articles examining black gay politics and art form part of the collection *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (Mercer, 1994). Also published in 1994 was Anna Marie Smith’s *New Right Discourse*, a study of sexuality and race in the politics of late twentieth century Britain.

In 1993, Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta published a short, popular account for black lesbians in Britain (*Lesbians Talk: Making Black Waves*) and in 1994, Mason-John edited a collection of essays *Talking Black: Lesbians of African and Asian Descent Speak Out*. In 1996, Zachary I. Nataf published *Lesbians Talk: Transgender*, which makes extensive reference to issues of race (and is in the same series as the Mason-John and Khambatta study).

I decided not to attempt a Literature Review of relevant material from gender studies, race studies and queer studies. A huge number of books in these fields offered scattered bits of useful material, but none offered exactly the approach I wanted or examined data from the social grouping I wanted to work with. As Harry Wolcott suggests, therefore, instead of trawling through a body of literature with which my participants as well as my academic audience are all too familiar, I “draw upon the literature selectively and appropriately as needed in the

telling of [my] story” (Wolcott, 1990. *Writing Up Qualitative Research*, cited Silverman, 2000, p.230).

I wrote a chapter outlining the background to a key concept for my research: performativity. In this chapter I look at a range of studies of black performance and literature from the United States and Britain, at relevant material from gender studies and anthropological and sociological studies of ritual.

I reject an approach which would see one body of material as fixed empirical data (ontology) capable of interpretation through another body of material: the theoretical tool-kit in a search for truth and justice (epistemology), although I still find it useful to speak of data and theory. Data and theory are different things but some things might be data in one place and theory in another. It is already apparent in the few books I referred to as literature in this field, that lines between the popular, the political and the academic aren't meaningful here. Because Mercer's and Francis's article was published in *Gay Times* instead of *Theory, Culture and Society*, because Nataf's slim volume is written in accessible language doesn't necessarily make this material data instead of theory. My participants are all intelligent and intellectual people who use whatever sparse material comes to hand – black gay sitcom characters, academic theory – to come to a highly sophisticated understanding of our lack of privilege. I have analysed publicly performed material that theorises (sometimes through body language) issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, (dis)ability; and academic theories of feminism, race studies, class analysis. Sometimes the academic theories were useful in clarifying what was being discussed in the performances, sometimes the performances were useful in clarifying the academic arguments and sometimes both performances and academic work provided the 'data' with which I was working.

1.3 The feminist category of 'experience'

My research developed inside the rich epistemology of feminisms (among which I include queer theory). Here I offer an account of the feminist category of 'experience', as this clarifies many aspects of the way in which I have conducted my research. I am drawing on Beverley Skeggs's account in *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, her study of working class women's identification, which I will come back to at several points in my thesis.

For Skeggs, 'experience' has a number of different meanings, and different 'experiences' have different values both in the world and in the terms of explanatory academic analysis. Privileging standpoint, as do feminist standpoint and black feminist standpoint thinkers such as Nancy Hartsock and Patricia Hill-Collins, reduces to the Kantian problem:

being = knowing / ontology = epistemology.

In addition, as Bat-Ami Bar On points out, in authorising some voices, it silences others (Bar On, 1993). However, experience rather than standpoint offers a key connection between the epistemological and ontological.

We must not be drawn into setting experience (as ontology) up in opposition to theory (as epistemology). Skeggs cites Genevieve Lloyd's work on the ways in which reason was conceptualised as a transcendence of the feminine. To avoid the dilemma: reason like a sexist man (epistemology) or be an irrational feminist (ontology), she suggests we understand that the process of interpretation is also 'experience'.

Avtar Brah describes "a notion of experience not as an unmediated guide to 'truth' but as a *practice* of making sense, both symbolically and narratively; as *struggle* over material conditions and over meaning" (Brah, 1992, p.141. My emphases) i.e. experience as process. Skeggs suggests that: "[e]xperience informs our take-up and production of positions but it does not fix us either in time or place." (Skeggs, 1997, p.27.) Following Theresa de Lauretis and Joan Scott, she takes her starting point as being:

not individuals who have experience but subjects who are
constituted through experience

...

It is through the experience of subjective construction that we come to know and be known. This enables the shift to be made from experience as a foundation for knowledge to experience as productive of a knowing subject in which their identities are continually in production rather than being occupied as fixed. It also suggests that not all experience produces knowledge; this depends on the context and the experience. It also means that women can take standpoints (on particular issues such as feminism, for instance) rather than being seen to own them through the accident of birth.

ibid., pp.27-8.

The detached scientific objectivity of epistemology is open to the feminist criticism that it is a “God trick” (see Harding, 1986), that it is pretending to a neutral all-seeing perspective – which is impossible. The feminist category of experience as productive of a knowing subject acknowledges that knowledge is produced through perspectives on particular experiences. It allows people, whether they are women academics or black and gay artists, to take standpoints drawing not only on personal experience of issues but also on understanding worked through popular or academic theory. For example, Patience Agbabi has described how she worked through a feminist understanding of domestic violence – of which she has no personal experience – to write her poem *Sentences* (see Chapter Four).

Henrietta Moore also seeks to get beyond the limitations of standpoint epistemology. She does so through Bourdieu’s link between the body and knowledge. For Bourdieu, praxis is about understanding social distinctions through the body; an “incorporated knowledge” (Moore, 1994, p.78):

The multiple nature of subjectivity is experienced physically, through practices which can be simultaneously physical and discursive.

ibid. p.81.

We might understand experience to be praxis, an incorporated knowledge. This makes experience a matter of the body, a form of knowledge in which those associated with ‘body’ (women academics, black and gay artists) are not always already excluded as ‘Other’.

The feminist category of experience and Bourdieu's concept of praxis confound the boundary between academic interpretation and project participant interpretation. For feminists who are struggling with the problem of theorising our own experience this is a crucial methodological step. I also found it a particularly useful insight in my thesis. I wanted to draw together thinking derived from the standpoint of people who might define or be defined black and gay, and thinking based in academic research. Skeggs's reading of 'experience' allowed me to avoid defining one of these constituencies as fieldwork data, the other as theory and then applying the theory (epistemology) to the fieldwork data (ontology) to see if it fitted. It allowed me to weight each constituency of thinking with equal value.

1.4 Ethnography

Questions of standpoint or experience were not part of the classic ethnographic method of social anthropology in which I was trained in my first degree. Developed by A.C. Haddon and W.H.R. Rivers (and further explored by Bronislaw Malinowski) this method operates a concept of fieldwork derived from naturalists' studies of a delineated area of ground. (This is also the case with 'fieldwork' in the Chicago School of sociology.) It involves immersion in another culture for a designated period of time: a year is felt to be a basic cross-cultural temporal cycle during which enough relevant social activity could be expected for a sufficient account of the social group. Even if I had conducted an ethnographic study of a black and gay community in Britain, it wouldn't have been in this classic style but in the less detached, more involved style of cultural studies. However anthropology and its characteristic method of ethnography were crucially important to my work. Classic anthropological accounts of ritual are important in my thesis⁸. A number of thinkers from anthropology are key in the

⁸ In popular understanding, the word 'ritual' has become associated with 'other' cultures, particularly the African, Asian and Australasian cultures which are the areas in which social or cultural anthropology has traditionally carried out its research. Most anthropologists today would, of course, be uncomfortable with the suggestion that Euro-American cultures differ from 'other' cultures in any basic respect, and would argue that ritual is important in all cultures. (Some anthropologists have worked along Weberian lines to suggest that different cultures have a

fields in which I am working (Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Renato Rosaldo, Pierre Bourdieu). Ethnographic material collected as part of my participation in my own 'community' supports my analyses of performances and academic texts. Finally, my project can be read as one which recovers the classic anthropological method from its racist and colonial heritage through emphasis on the kind of reflexivity practised in queer theory.

The different ethos of cultural studies has radically altered the way in which ethnography is practised by forcing engagement with the concerns which feminist and anti-colonial critics have raised in social and cultural anthropology. Such studies are rarely conducted through isolation from the ethnographer's own culture and immersion in someone-else's culture over a period of a year. They are often practised by a member of the community being studied.

The tension between authorship, advocacy and empowerment which characterised ground-breaking ethnographic studies produced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Back, lecture, Goldsmiths College, 12.2.1999) forces personal standpoint into the limelight for analysis. Cultural studies follows feminist principles, and understands the 'God trick' objectivity of classic ethnography to be a hidden interest disguised as scientific objectivity. It is an absolute principle of the ethnography of cultural studies that

different, even 'primitive', societal relationship with ritual. Mary Douglas, for example, went to quite involved lengths to try to find some grounds for arguing that industrialised 'Western' cultures have progressive religions, while 'primitive' religions are marked by lack of differentiation and interweaving of the wider universe into personal life, see Douglas, 1966, p.89). However, given this background, I should make it clear that, in considering through the concept of ritual, the work of British performers and artists whose origins or heritage is partly in those areas sometimes seen as 'other', I am not placing their work in an arena of 'primitive' art more accessible to the anthropologist than to the literary or arts critic. Black British art has a complex relationship to African and Asian cultures (in particular). For political or personal reasons, black British art may draw more frequently on the influence of African and Asian arts or wider cultures, but should also be placed in the European tradition within which it has been developed. Attempting to locate black British art in a racialised context often leads to it being wrongly placed. Diran Adebayo has remarked that his novel *some kind of black* has received more critical attention from the social sciences than relevant arts disciplines. ("A reading and discussion for *Re-inventing Britain*", Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. 16.3.97.) I draw on the concept of ritual to examine the performances I discuss in the same way that Victor Turner draws on ritual to examine Euro-American theatre, and not because I think that ritual is a more suitable concept for addressing black as opposed to white performance than, for example, William Empson's concept of 'ambiguity' (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*).

authorial standpoint should be acknowledged and interrogated. Thus Back warns of the danger of seeing ethnography as an “immaculate reception” (*ibid.*), a transparent method through which we can channel data uncorrupted. Personal standpoint and external politics always already form the channel along which my data is encouraged to flow.

Throughout my research, I have been aware of what Nici Nelson and Susan Wright call “the fieldworker’s double perspective”. If there is such a thing, I am a member of the black and gay community, not on essentialist grounds of mixed race status and sexual preferences or even on the grounds of my personal experience of racism and same sex desire but rather because I have been there in peer support groups, club nights, poetry and music events, and Gay Pride marches. (I have also worked as a critic of black gay arts and literature, and so perhaps I have contributed to a feeling that there is a black gay collectivity producing arts and literature which can be critiqued only within an understanding derived from that politically defined position.) At the same time, I am a social scientist and while I have undertaken this piece of research from a subjective understanding as a member of the ‘community’, I have been confident in my ability to do so primarily because I am trained in ways and means of conducting research. As Silverman remarks:

Having good intentions, or the correct political attitude, is unfortunately never the point.

Silverman, 2000, p.175.

The point of this project has not been to write a polemic championing the black and queer cause but an account of certain political processes enacted through embodied practices which are of relevance to black and white, gay and straight alike. A subjective and emotional understanding of these processes enriches my work but doesn’t comprise my method. As Back and Nelson and Wright make clear, what is productive is a *tension* between subjective understanding and scientific method, rather than an account solely of personal experience.

My academic knowledge; that particular epistemology through which my own experience is mediated, distinguishes my understanding from that of my participants. I brought the habit of rigorous analytic thought to bear on that

understanding and shared that thinking as well as the thinking of relevant theorists (Butler, Haraway and Bakhtin were among those whose work I photocopied for participants). This didn't in any way raise my thinking above my participants' in a relationship of analysis to data. Rather, we shared ideas drawing on my academic work and their academic and performance work, to hammer out a conceptual frame in which to understand our politics and their performance. Sometimes we disagreed, and if this disagreement couldn't be resolved, we agreed to differ. Where what is being presented is my thinking rather than our common thinking, I have signalled this. (E.g. p.226 Valerie Mason-John describes her persona Queenie in terms of drag. Subsequently I wondered if it were related to high femme practice. I say this is my own rather than a shared idea.)

It may be difficult to contain the emotional richness of subjective understanding in the writing of research. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* – a seminal study in cultural studies – draws on his own experience growing up in a working class culture but not under any pretension to ethnography. His work has a subjective richness which it is impossible to step back from and classify as a *method*. In the same way, I felt that my personal subjective experience of the suffering and pleasure which simultaneously iterates and generates black and gay identity was not one I should heavily rely on in a sociological thesis (it is rather the material of autobiography and art).

Nelson and Wright offer this account of reflexivity and the balance which must be maintained over the personal in ethnography:

Detractors confused reflexivity with narcissistic, self-indulgent, navel gazing. Some of the new genre of accounts of fieldwork came close to presenting experience in the field as a means of learning more about their own personality, giving little insight into the people with whom this self was interacting (Caesara, 1982). Instead, reflexivity is a process of continuously moving from the intensely personal experience of one's own social interactions in the field, to the more distanced analysis of that experience for an understanding of how identities are negotiated, and how social categories, boundaries, hierarchies and processes of domination are experienced and maintained. Reflexivity is the means through

which the fieldworker's double perspective of insider/outsider, stranger/friend, and participant/observer is kept in tension.

in Nelson and Wright (eds.), 1994, p.48.

To go into the autobiographical details of an ethnography of my own community risks descending into navel-gazing.

An ethnography is both a piece of research and the written account of that research, usually a monograph: an account of a single social group. I didn't want to write a monograph. As I have explained, I don't think of a black and gay 'community' but of people positioned in a fragmented society, who have a perspective on how that positioning (and the positioning of those who position us) is effected. I wanted to write an account of the interactions of several fragmented groups in a post-industrial society from the perspective of those less powerful, who are rarely able to tell or hear the story from our side.

Anthropologists' awareness of writing as a distinct and formative stage of the ethnographic study did, however, contribute to my understanding of the research process. That awareness, as opposed to the belief in writing as a transparent process via which the data collected and analysis made is transmitted, has allowed interrogation of the personal standpoint and external politics which shape the research project as it finally appears, in its written form. (Geertz, 1972, Clifford and Marcus, 1986, Chapter 6 of Moore, 1988, Rosaldo, 1989.)

This critical atmosphere has encouraged me to think particularly hard about pronouns in my account. Rather than the I (ethnographer) / they (participants) of the classic ethnography, I have used I/we/they. In the change, these terms lost their fixity. Sometimes 'we' meant those who are defined black and queer including me, but it resonated with the old ethnographic 'we', which meant 'dear readers' and me. I knew people would be reading this thesis to whom black and queer are not 'we' but I hoped the unsettling moment of being dis-placed into black-and-queer-ness would be as productive for them as the unsettling moment of always reading the white, straight, masculine research perspective as 'we' (see Moore, 1988, Chapter 6) and black-and-queer-ness as 'they' has been destructive for us. Sometimes I used 'we' to mean women

academics including me. Sometimes I found that women academics and those defined black and queer had the same needs and agenda (see especially Chapter Five).

An awareness of a 'poetics' as well as a politics of ethnography made me carefully consider how I structured and phrased this thesis. While I do believe it should be possible to write an accessible and clear account of my research which might be a pleasure to read, I don't subscribe to the idea that academic writing could be a form of literature. Working with literature has made me conscious of the emotional sway which is exercised by fine writing. (A belief in the persuasiveness of style as well as content is appropriate to a study situated in postmodern thinking⁹.)

I was conscious of the impact which such apparently straightforward questions as where chapters are placed in the thesis could have. Placing 'theory' in early chapters and 'data' in later chapters lends 'theory' a certain primacy, so I was determined to interleave academic thinking and my participants' work in the main body of my thesis. This isn't a classic structure for a thesis and was difficult to manage but I believe that the understanding of academic and participant thinking which it forces has enriched my work.

I had to make a choice between themed chapters and chapters which are geared around particular performers. For reasons of clarity; because I felt the material more naturally fell into that structure, I chose to organise it around the individual participants. This meant that I sometimes curtailed my account of their work in order to get a proper progression of my thinking through the thesis as a whole. For example, allowing the move from feminist standpoint epistemology exemplified in one of Patience Agbabi's poems to queer theory in Ajamu's photography, meant that although Agbabi's work can also be placed within queer thinking, I didn't develop this theme fully in relation to her work.

Silverman warns of a tendency to "romanticism" in ethnography: over-identification with project participants. Sometimes I did over-identify with black

⁹ The Gilbert and Mulkay 1984 study of chemists using rhetoric rather than cold science to prove their hypotheses also supports such a belief.

and queer perspectives, in particular when working to show the prejudice which had constructed accounts of Linda Bellos and Justin Fashanu in the 'gutter' press (see Chapter Three). I produced analyses which may be regarded as overly partial in order to counter-balance the homophobic manipulation in the press accounts with which I was working.

Feminist perspectives in anthropology (Ardener, Moore, Nelson and Wright, Rubin) exercised an important influence on my thinking. Also important was that awareness of the body which Henrietta Moore describes as "incorporated knowledge" and which is here discussed by Nelson and Wright as part of the method:

Anthropologists, immersed for extended periods in another culture or in their own as participant observer, learn not only through the verbal, through the transcript, but through all the senses, through movement, through their bodies and whole being in total practice.

Okely, cited in Nelson and Wright (eds.), 1994, p.48.

In conducting the research, I was aware that I was working with perspectives which came not only from the position of the Hegelian Slave but are also, in the terms of the Cartesian binary so dominant in Euro-American cultures, body. Women, black men, gay men, the working classes, the disabled, are all in different ways aligned with the corporeal, the sensual.

Those in the position of Hegel's Slave may have a more holistic perspective, but as Edwin Ardener argues (see § 3.6), we must struggle to find a way of voicing experience from that perspective. The question of how the disempowered can speak our truth using only the language of hegemonic discourse is as relevant to black people in the academy as it is to black communities in wider society. bell hooks has written about having access only to soliloquy, to speech which is not listened to (cited Smith, 1994). Donna Haraway argues that "literacy is a special mark of women of colour" (Haraway 1985, reprinted 1991, pp.174-5). Following Cherie Moraga, she suggests that politics provides the language of subordinated groups with particular richness. This richness can only be acquired, however, (like the Slave's insights in Hegel's dialectic) through suffering and struggle.

Given that those associated with body rather than mind are “muted” (Ardener, 1968) in hegemonic discourse, it seems obvious that we will develop ways of expressing ourselves through the body; through performance. This should not lead to a simplistic assumption that corporeal expression is the only arena in which the disempowered can “speak” their interests (although the body language of the disempowered would be a rich topic for research). Because women anthropologists are “muted” through being associated with body rather than mind doesn’t mean we don’t think or can’t talk. As feminist reflections on the category of experience show, there is a drive to get science beyond a sterile association with mind over body. I find Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of embodied practices useful here. ‘Embodied practices’ draws together the corpo-real, the body in symbolic structures, the meanings of movement within a semiological understanding of the world. It thus bridges the disembodied thinking of e.g. Foucault, and recent concerns that the body has been lost from postmodern thought.

1.5 Interviews

The interviews I conducted were unstructured interviews, usually geared around developing an understanding of performances. I used them to collect biographical details, which I wrote up partly to contextualise my accounts of the performances I analysed, partly – along with the his/herstory – to give a sense of lived black and gay experience. I never taped interviews, but made rough notes (in dedicated notebooks) instead. This was partly to protect my participants’ confidentiality and gain trust. Since I wasn’t using the interviews as primary data, the only reason for fully recording and transcribing them (and they were sometimes several hours long) was for further use in later research. I decided to set that aside in favour of a more informal approach. I made some one-off interviews earlier in the research with a few people who’d responded to an appeal I made for informants and throughout the research with people producing public performance material. With three main project participants, ~~however,~~ I drew on series of extensive interviews, in two cases dating from before the start

of my doctoral research. There were a number of factors influencing my choice of those three participants, some of which I have covered throughout this chapter. The two main reasons for working with them were firstly that a piece of their work dealt in particular ways with a particular theme in which I was interested (e.g. race, gender and sexuality; class, race and gender). Secondly, these three participants were available for extensive periods of time throughout the project for me to work with them.

When I had written up my material I gave it back to my participants. This was firstly so that they could confirm that I had written about them in a way which wouldn't mis-represent them or damage their interests (it was part of the responsibility of maintaining a working relationship of trust). Secondly, it was in line with a more participant-oriented approach to data which Catherine Kohler Riessman describes here, one which:

Unlike traditional qualitative methods ... does not fragment the text into discrete content categories for coding purposes but, instead, identifies longer stretches of talk that take the form of narrative – a discourse organized around time and consequential events in a 'world' recreated by the narrator. The approach assumes interviewees structure their replies in the ways they do for strategic reasons – to effectively communicate 'what happened' – and, consequently, determining the organization of the discourse is an important analytic task.

Riessman, 1990, p.1195.

'Narrative'¹⁰ suggests an iteration and generation of identity, utilising while remaining within social discourse. It doesn't fit in either the liberal humanist idea of freely chosen personality or the social constructivist school and is therefore particularly appropriate for my research. If the interview allows participants to develop a narrative within which they emerge, I argue it would be more productive to allow them to engage further with that narrative than for me to deconstruct and reconstruct it. To do otherwise in a situation where I was seeking to uncover my participants' thinking about the processes of identification, would be to treat my participants as 'cultural dopes' (Harold Garfinkel, 1967, cited

¹⁰ The concept of 'narrative' is also used by cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo and gay studies scholar Kenneth Plummer and has some congruence with the feminist category of experience.

Silverman 2000). I also felt they had rights in their own narratives which it was incumbent on me to respect because those narratives go against the grain of hegemonic discourse and are very rarely respected. That's not to say I relinquished all control over my data. There was always an understanding that we have different but equally valid perspectives on what happens. Often my participants and I had tense arguments about what material I had used and how.¹¹ Sometimes I accepted my participants' version and sometimes they accepted mine but in the end, as long as ethical principles were respected, we were agreed that this is my research project and not a collaborative account.

As with ethnography, feminist perspectives in the development of interviewing as a method have been important in clarifying my approach. The validation of emotions and empathy in the work of Anne Oakley and Jocelyn Cornwall (cited Seale (ed.), 1998) have added to ideas about the body and less formal methods of data collection which I brought from anthropology.

1.6 Discourse analysis

In the main, the ethnographic work I did and interviews I conducted served to support my analysis of public 'performances'. (I discuss definitions of 'performance' at length in Chapter Two, and explain there on what grounds I include photography as well as performed poetry and monologue in this category.) I also offer analysis of academic writing, conducted along similar lines. I bring all these analyses together under the heading 'discourse analysis'. What I am practising is discourse analysis not literary criticism. I have worked as a cultural critic, utilising my sociological training to clarify questions of identity politics in order to arrive at a better understanding of black and gay British arts. Here, however, I examine artistic performance to clarify sociological questions about politics and processes of identification.

¹¹ I think this supports my argument that identity isn't fixed. My participants were often uncomfortable at the fixing of an identity which a written record of their discursive reflections implied.

Potter and Wetherall acknowledge that because of separate developments in discourse analysis in different disciplines, definition of 'discourse' varies. It is generally defined as forms of talk and writing, rather than the discourse of Foucault, and with no mention of the visual or corporeal. (This definition can comfortably include academic talk and writing, as exemplified in G.N. Gilbert and M.J. Mulkey's 1984 study *Opening Pandora's Box: A Sociological Analysis of Scientists' Discourse*.) Fran Tonkiss, however, points out:

The important thing to think about here is not so much what sorts of language 'count' as discourse, as how discourse analysts approach language as data. Within discourse analysis, language is viewed as the *topic* of the research.... Rather than gathering accounts or texts so as to gain access to people's views and attitudes, or to find out what happened at a particular event, the discourse analyst is interested in how people use language to construct their accounts of the social world.

Tonkiss, in Seale (ed.) 1998, pp.247-8 (author's emphases).

If we accept that discourse analysis is a method which deconstructs constructed accounts of the social world, then it can stretch to photographs, films and even the prison buildings in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. This definition allows me to expand my analysis beyond the words in the pieces I address and include the corporeal parts of the performances.

Potter and Wetherall offer a genealogy of discourse analysis in which it derives from Noam Chomsky's work, through J.L. Austin and 'speech act' theory, ethnomethodology and semiology. Like ethnography, we can see it as modulated in cultural studies. Austin and speech act theory are impeccable forebears, but Chomsky's influence would have to be minimised in favour of Foucault. Harriette Marshall and Margaret Wetherall argue that discourse analysis treats language as neither neutral nor innocent (Marshall and Wetherall, 1989, p.108). Here is an obvious point where Chomsky – with his belief in a neutral place in which justice can be constituted – can be displaced by Foucault.¹² Like Foucauldian thought, discourse analysis can then be seen to be

¹² See Introduction to Rabinow (ed.), 1984 for an account of the Chomsky/Foucault debate on justice.

concerned with uncovering the operation of power in discourse: ceasing to treat the document as inert matter.

Some of the studies which are key to my research can also be thought of as discourse analysis. In particular, Mercer's analysis of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech (Mercer, 1990), which draws heavily on both semiology and cultural studies; and Smith's analysis of New Right politics (Smith, 1994).

1.7 Cultural studies

Cultural studies has been a most fruitful forum within which my thesis has developed. Cultural studies is not bound by discipline and draws on two disciplines with which I was particularly familiar: english literature and social anthropology. The tradition of cultural studies allowed me to combine ethnography with cultural criticism in my work. Simon During sees cultural studies as originating with F.R. Leavis's 'Great Tradition', designed to establish a recognisable canon of literature in order to elevate ordinary people. (It may seem odd to think of cultural studies, with its emphasis on popular culture, drawing on such a philosophy, but it should be borne in mind that Leavis was working at a time when the Classics dominated higher education and literature in the vernacular was not highly regarded.)

Cultural studies has been characterised not so much by a championship of the popular as by a refusal to treat any distinction between high and popular cultures as academically meaningful. Raymond Williams, working within Marxism, developed the idea of literature as embedded in 'culture', which he famously defines in *Culture and Society*. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* developed the significance of popular culture in comparison to high art. Political engagement with issues of class has marked cultural studies (as I discuss in Chapter Six). However, the fragmentation of working-class life-style and long established cultural traditions, together with the rising impact of large-scale immigration and popular racism, led to a shift in focus (During, 1993). With the advent of Stuart Hall to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) which Hoggart had established at the University of Birmingham, race politics

became a leading topic in characteristic ethnographic studies. Cultural studies didn't attempt sociological surveys of particular ethnic populations (see Solomos, 1993). Those working in this field aren't interested in a neutral academic understanding of politics:

If at times what we have written seems too firmly in a critical mode, we feel this is a small price to pay while the predicament of the black communities is professionally obscured by those who make a living on the back of black sufferings.

Gilroy for the Race and Politics Group, CCCS, 1982, p.7.

As During points out, cultural studies was produced partly in reaction to Thatcherism and the New Right, and was also heavily influenced by feminism:

The new mode of cultural studies no longer concentrated on reading culture as primarily directed against the state. Mainly under the impact of new feminist work at first, it began to affirm 'other' ways of life on their own terms. Emphasis shifted from communities positioned against large power blocs and bound together as classes or subcultures to ethnic and women's groups committed to maintaining and elaborating autonomous values, identities, and ethics. This moment in cultural studies pictured society as much more decentred

During, 1993, p.15.

The inter-disciplinary conception of 'culture' which shifts between a way of life and artistic discourse on that way of life; a politically engaged style of working which follows on from Thatcherism and the New Right, which is designed to take up issues of class and race and is influenced by feminism – these are appropriate to a study concerned with a black and gay presence in Britain. My study also returns to the earlier emphasis which During describes as “communities positioned against large power blocs”, bearing in mind the later emphasis on groups maintaining autonomous values. The work of Paul Gilroy, who was part of what Chris Jenks considers a foundational postgraduate programme at CCCS (Jenks, 1993), is of particular significance in my study. A combination of political and cultural analysis which informs *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, and reflections on black cultural practices in both *The Black Atlantic* and essays republished in *Small Acts*, have influenced my work, as they

have influenced many of those whose work I rely on, like Kobena Mercer and Anna Marie Smith.

1.8 His/Herstory¹³

Although I am not by training a historian, I undertook some archive work and trawled through both primary and secondary published material. Drawing on the study by Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta and collection of essays edited by Mason-John, I developed a chronology of significant events which might give some form of his/herstory for people who might define or be defined as black and gay (see Appendix I). Mason-John and Khambatta give a black lesbian chronology, including events of significance to black gay men and the essays in Mason-John's edited collection contained many additional significant dates which I was able to add to the chronology. Since I am a member of the 'community', I had taken part in or knew of several more key events/dates. I took dates from C.V.s given to me by project participants and people I had previously interviewed for articles in the gay press. I also undertook archive work at the Glasgow Women's Library, which houses the national black lesbian archives, at the British Library Publications Department and in Lambeth Council's archives.

Initially I sent out a first draft of the chronology to a range of personal and professional contacts. I regarded this as an exercise in letting people know about my project, but many people did take the time to write back, sometimes in some detail. In January 1999, the lesbian lifestyle magazine *Diva* ran a paragraph in which I described my research and invited respondents to contact me. I had a couple of responses to whom I also sent the chronology and a brief account of black and gay 'community'.

The response to copies of the chronology was uniformly warm. People felt affirmed by seeing a list of events/dates they could claim as their own his/herstory. They wanted to contribute to the chronology and to put me in touch

¹³ 'History' has been criticised by radical feminists as a term and a practice for its focus on men and male perspectives. Out of respect for those of my participants who are radical feminists, and to reflect the gender split which seems to be endemic in gay communities, I have chosen to use the term 'his/herstory' when referring to my own work here.

with others who they felt had important information or perspectives on such a his/herstory¹⁴. However, a list of events linked to dates does have problems as a tool for understanding a historical period. For black and gay communities it is even more likely than for many other communities that some events may not have been documented. They may have been seen as unimportant according to contemporary white middle class heterosexist values, or deliberately kept secret or semi-secret to protect those taking part from racism and homophobia. Secondly, such a list may give a spurious air of collectivity to events which were not experienced as linked at the time. Providing a 'history' to a 'community' may in addition legitimate in retrospect the idea that since it now has a history, *ipso facto* there must be a community.

In their account of black lesbian herstory, and in response to the difficulties of collecting material on British black lesbian culture, the Lesbian History Group suggest oral histories as a method:

One source for the recent history of Black and working-class lesbians is oral history, and some testimonies have been collected by lesbian and gay archives. This material and approach needs to be developed, and also written up and made available.

Lesbian History Group, 1989, pp.228-9.

The traditional source for working class history projects, oral history does offer a rich source of material about the experience of people who have lived as both 'black' and 'gay' (especially those who are also working class). It is important, however, not to assume that what is an appropriate historical resource for one societally under-privileged group is automatically appropriate for another. Oral history was partly developed using newly available recording technology to collect information from people who had not had access to the high level of literacy characteristic of the middle classes. Members of the black and gay communities have, by contrast, seemed to me unusually articulate, although for particular reasons (legal or social) more often in performed than written material.

¹⁴ I have been extremely fortunate in the enthusiasm and dedication of my participants who have been not only generous but eager to contribute to my research.

Although I do draw on oral accounts and interviews, I suggest a full his/herstory of people who define or are defined black and gay should also look further afield.

The historical approach suggested by the Lesbian History Group is open to the critique of essentialism. It suggests that a black gay his/herstory must only be that of black gay people's experience, and that this can only be got via black gay people. A Foucauldian approach would look rather at processes of racial and sexual identity; at how particular discursive formations have been generated by matrices of power and at how those discursive formations also worked to maintain those matrices of power. This approach allowed me to write a his/herstory of discursive formations of race and sex out of white and heterosexual material as well as black and gay material.

I found (white) gay and lesbian historical accounts of early periods when no material is available on British black gay people or experience *per se* useful if used in this way. One literary study was useful as a source in itself. Emma Donoghue's account records attitudes to race as well as sexuality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and shows how these work to reinforce each other. By contrast, A.L. Rowse's account of the nineteenth century is so racist itself that it would be necessary to go back to the original source material to see what attitudes actually prevailed at that time (see Chapter Three for a full account). However, his writing reveals how prevalent and acceptable racism was in the scholarly circles of 1970s white gay men.

As well as using my chronology of events and white gay and lesbian his/herstories, I did some analysis of two 'media events' of significance to black and gay communities. Smith's study *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality. Britain, 1968-1990* examines how the politics of Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher worked through a repudiation of the 'black' and the 'queer' as Outsider-figures and Smith briefly discusses how they utilised the black lesbian as a particular figure in this discourse. With her study and Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* in mind, I examined how the out black lesbian political figure Linda Bellos was represented in newspaper reports of the 1980s. Secondly, I examined four articles in which the footballer Justin Fashanu came

out as gay in 1990, and the ensuing media furore – particularly reactions in the black (heterosexist) press.

Because there was more readily available published material by black lesbian women, and because as a woman myself I had more contact with lesbian and bisexual women, my chronology is skewed towards women's perceptions of the period. I was also constrained by time. There are many events of significance I haven't yet been able to document. I worked through Lambeth Council's press cuttings for the two years from 1985 to 1987, but this falls short of Linda Bellos's two year period in office. There are some articles relevant to Justin Fashanu's coming out I have yet to track down and incorporate in my analysis. I hope a full historical project can complete what I have started here.

Following popular conceptions of the work of Martin Bernal, British black and gay people have tended to look towards a his/herstory which recovers African and Asian homosexual practices such as Nuer "ghost marriages" (Evans-Pritchard, 1951) or the lesbian sex celebrated in ancient erotic carvings in India (see Thadani, 1996). The recovery of these his/herstories are important projects (particularly for Nuer and Indian peoples) but each in itself could form several PhD theses. What I want to offer here is not a global his/herstory of gay sexuality (which would provide a source of global cultural pride for black and gay communities). I want to situate a black and gay presence in Britain in its specific national-historic context, to show how discursive matrices are constructed around black/white, gay/straight to secure white and straight identity against black and gay identity in the context of 'nation'.

1.9 Ethics (reflexivity, responsibility, respect)

The people with whom I worked are vulnerable in many ways and ethics was therefore a vital part of my project (which I have discussed as part of each method I drew on). From the beginning I had to ensure my participants were protected from unnecessary exposure. As the project developed I realised that working in a realm of prejudice and hostility and of the difficult emotions which

my participants and I must manage while conducting our lives and work was also emotionally gruelling for me as a researcher.

Respect for confidentiality wasn't a straightforward process. Many of those who are defined black and gay are very recognisable, for example, I have never met anyone-else of mixed Japanese/English heritage on the gay scene in Britain and everyone would know who was meant if someone gave me a pseudonym and wrote about me in those terms. Because the gay communities are fairly closed off from black communities, it's possible for performers to be flamboyantly queer in gay venues but closeted to their families¹⁵. (The support of the family is even more critical to those who are defined both black and gay because the black family can offer a haven in a racist society.) I had therefore to guard against assuming that a flamboyantly queer stance automatically meant people had no qualms about being 'out' outside the gay communities.

I chose to work mostly with people who were already public figures known to be gay and who preferred use of their own names because they were keen to receive appropriate critique of their work. I always checked that my references to their lives and work were acceptable to them. In the wake of media reporting such as that of Linda Bellos and Justin Fashanu (see Chapter Three), those defined black and gay are understandably cautious about public exposure, although we are keen to create positive media representation. When working as a journalist, I had always shown people what I had written about them before I sent it to be published and I was able to draw on this established practice to reassure participants.

Sometimes as I continued my research it seemed impossible to go on. Participants were so frequently unable to come and talk about their work because they were too distressed (sometimes physically injured) as a result of harassment by the public or state institutions like the police, or they were in mourning, or too depressed by the daily struggle with racism, sexism, homophobia; that I wondered if I should write it up as a special research

¹⁵ When Gay Pride was celebrated one year in an area of high black settlement (Brixton, London), concern was expressed by black and gay people who feared recognition by fellow black community members.

problem. Sometimes I felt too anxious to undertake a balanced interviewing technique. This was embarrassingly unscientific. It was upsetting, too, to examine hostility, prejudice and violence in my role as social scientist and then perceive such incidents in my private life more clearly. However, I realised that the situation which prevents us from carrying on 'as normal' is not a research problem but the reason why I was doing the research.

As hooks notes (hooks, 1995, p.13-14), in a situation of disempowerment and psychic and physical violence, people frequently lash out not at those responsible – who are out of reach, but at those near at hand. The complex of fear, anger and uncertainty which I was poking into was all too likely to explode in my face and, as Nelson and Wright note, it takes a method that works through all the senses to work with this complex while protecting my participants and myself as best I could from the fall-out.

Luckily I was working with people whose own work is along similar lines and we therefore shared an understanding of the problems we encountered (in a common framework of popular social theory and psychology). I already had a relationship of trust based on friendship with most of my participants, and as this developed into one of colleague-ality, they were much too sharp ever to allow me to slip into treating them with less than complete respect as colleagues and equals. In all the best ethnographic projects, where relationships develop intensely over a lengthy period of time and so become personal friendships, relationships with possible project participants do break down just as friendships break down in everyone's lives (see the story of Geertz and the typewriter in Rosaldo, 1989). On the whole, however, my participants as much as I worked hard to ensure that in the midst of the difficult emotions our work stirs up, we maintained a good working relationship of mutual respect.

1.10 Conclusion

In practising a number of different methods to draw out data for my study: ethnography, interviews, discourse analysis, archive research; and in taking that data back to my participants, I am using triangulation. This is not in the weak sense of checking my data was correct or 'true', but in the sense of combining several methods to access a rich combination of sources for data (see Seale (ed.), 1998). I felt that the complexity of my topic required a complex of methods. To draw out the workings of (social) discourse within which identity is iterated and generated in embodied practices via the perspectives of those disempowered within that discourse when that is my own perspective is a complicated operation which benefits by being approached from more than one direction. The tradition of thought within which I developed my research: cultural studies, encourages such poly-methodology.

I don't present my analyses of performances as a manifesto from a black and gay constituency. What I hope to show is how crucial the black and the queer are to the British. I begin to do this in an archaeological history of a black queer presence going back to the seventeenth century, and drawing on Smith's revelation of the centrality of race and sexuality to the New Right politics which have dominated late twentieth century Britain (Smith, 1994). I examine what performances in a black and queer ethos and academic theories – especially feminist theories, think about the questions of identification.

In developing my thesis so that the different chapters are geared around different artists and their work rather than particular themes, I may inadvertently give a false impression. I anchored my analysis of feminist thought in my account of Patience Agbabi's poem not because she is more of a feminist and less of a queer thinker than the photographer Ajamu but because her poem was developed at an earlier time in a strong feminist ethos. There are feminist and queer themes in Valerie Mason-John's work – as I discuss in Chapter Six – but one section of her performance offered me a richly informed point around which to anchor thinking on race and class.

I draw on performances which are sympathetic to my own thinking, from the 1990s. These might be seen to follow on from Mercer's analyses of British black gay performance in the 1980s. There are black gay performances which are complicit in sexist, racist and homophobic discourse. I decided it would not be helpful to focus attention on those. I already had a richly informed source of data in the pieces I was looking at and pointing a finger at people to whom an accusation of racism or homophobia, in print, would be personally as well as professionally devastating in order to give my work some semblance of objectivity, seemed to me irresponsible.

In methodological terms, my thesis offers four new developments useful for the social sciences and beyond. In the first place, I develop a theory which is capable of managing the analysis of many processes of identification simultaneously, which a number of people have been signalling as crucial for a thorough sociological understanding, particularly in race studies (for example, Brah, 1996) and gender studies (for example, Skeggs, 1997). I do so partly through the analysis of performance material, and this opens up this rich source for sociological analysis but also lays the ground for the development of a cultural critique appropriate to black and queer arts which draws on sociological understanding. In the simultaneous analysis of project participants' performances and academic studies as experience/thinking, I practice a more participatory form of research. Finally, drawing on classic anthropological methods, a critique of standpoint epistemologies, and queer theory and activism, I develop a reflexive form of positioning which can be used in both social research and politics to come to an understanding of others that doesn't have to be based in personal experience of suffering.

Chapter Two Performativity

This chapter will explore Judith Butler's formulation 'gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix'. It will offer definitions of 'ritual' and 'performance' and will consider the importance of the body, emotions and politics in these realms. Butler's thinking supports the understanding of identification which is conveyed in my participants' performance work, as I will show in relation to Patience Agbabi's *The Black The White and The Blue*, in particular. This chapter will also show the critical significance of ritual and performance for my participants.

'Performativity' is a relatively new field which spans a range from the arts (including especially the Classics) to sociology. It takes its name from J.L. Austin's concept of the performative sentence or "speech act" (Austin, 1955), or rather, from Judith Butler's appropriation of the performative in her formulation 'gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990). Butler's appropriation gave the performative a new popularity in academic thought. A misunderstanding of her formulation to read 'gender is a performance' opened the flood-gates to a stream of work thinking about the politics and processes of identification in (dramatic) performances (see for example Case, Brett and Foster (eds.), 1995, Parker and Sedgwick (eds.), 1995). In spite of Butler's attempts to correct mis-reading of her work (Butler, 1993), these two different concepts: performative and performance, have continued to generate new research. My study is part of this growing school of work.

'Performativity' plays on the two meanings of 'to perform': 'to do' and 'to act a dramatic role'. This allows it to bring together ideas about the 'doing' of identities and 'dramatic performance'. The range of thinkers named as a retrospective tradition of thought which could secure this new school includes Austin and Butler but also Erving Goffman, Mikhail Bakhtin and Victor Turner. In this chapter, I will explore this range, giving first my understanding of Butler's 'gender as performative' in which I reiterate Butler's argument that gender is not performance. For a proper understanding of the situation of those defined black

and gay it is vital not to think of identity as performed. I will reject Erving Goffman's use of the term 'performance' (in the sense of 'dramatic performance') as a metaphor for social life and accept Noam Chomsky's use of the term in its sense of a 'realm of doing'.

Work on ritual has been an unacknowledged influence in the field of performativity (especially Turner and Douglas) and it will help to explicate that influence here. The formal initiation ritual on which much anthropological study focuses is relatively rare in British communities, but I will give examples of endemic and significant ritual in London in which identity is generated and iterated. Ritual is important for my participants (and me) principally because we're usually barred from a ritual constitution of identity. In this chapter and in Chapter Seven I will discuss ways in which rituals like some forms of music produce identity in particular ways, for example black masculinity as heterosexual or even homophobic. My participants (and I) are unable to participate in ritual on these lines. We often – though not always – feel a stronger sense of not-belonging, than an intensified collectivity at weddings, national sporting occasions or Christmas with the family. On occasion we do establish a very small space in which to generate and iterate our own identity in collective moments, and sometimes we adapt other space for the momentary pleasure of being black-and-gay. For example, the film-maker Inge Blackman argues that ragga music and dance culture allowed black women to be sensual with each other (quoted Back, 1996, p.232). Club Kali – the fortnightly gay Asian night at the Dome in London – offers an "attitude free" zone in which being a queer Asian can be experienced in a mix of Bhangra¹ and House² with Bollywood³ movie clips as a backdrop.

Compared with the rest of our lived experience in a white, straight, masculine, middle class and able-bodied hegemony, however, these are rare and precious moments. It's in this situation that my participants produce their

¹ South Asian music genre.

² A genre of dance music which originated in gay clubs, see Currid, in Case et al, 1995.

³ The Indian film industry – especially its kitsch musicals. A 'Hollywood' on the outskirts of Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay.

work. Unlike those who can draw on traditions of performance which generate and iterate identity in a ritual manner, they *must* step back from the processes of identification which they don't fit into and question what is at play in ritual. I will give a definition of 'dramatic performance', considering in particular accounts of black British performance, one of the traditions in which my participants' work is situated. In the final section of this chapter, I will explore whether British black and gay performance work is ritual, through a comparison with African-American performance.

2.1 Judith Butler's formulation 'gender as performative'

Butler's formulation 'gender as performative' has been consistently misunderstood to refer to performance. Here, I will set out my understanding of this first half of Butler's formulation. Her complex theory of the politics of gender, sexuality and the body seems to fit the incorporated knowledge conveyed in my participants' work (see especially Chapter Four) and a full understanding of it helps support my analysis of the work.

'Gender as performative' draws on the 'speech act theory' developed by J.L. Austin explicitly in relation to the meaning of 'to perform' as 'to do something', and not its meaning as in 'dramatic performance'. In *How to do Things with Words*, Austin suggests that while the majority of statements are "descriptive", there is a kind of sentence:

which is, or is a part of, the doing of an action.
Austin, 1976, p.5.

Austin called the descriptive kind of sentences 'constatives' and the doing kind 'performatives' (Austin, 1976, p.6). Examples he gives of performative sentences are:

I do [take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife].
I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*.
I give and bequeath my watch to my brother.
I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.

All of these sentences call into being something which was not, until it was said: a marriage bond, a named vessel, a bequest, a wager. They achieve something⁴, they don't just describe, they do.

Butler's idea of 'gender as performative' is a radical understanding of Simone de Beauvoir's « On ne naît pas femme, on le devient »⁵ (cited Butler, 1990, p.33). Butler takes Wittig's idea that language "casts sheaves of reality upon the social body" (cited Butler 1990, p.115). She suggests that if, as de Beauvoir argues, one becomes woman, then "*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming" (Butler 1990, p.33, Butler's italics). The "sheaves" cast upon us by language perform a violent shaping: a regulatory production of the being that e.g. *woman* is. Woman – or gender – is as performative⁶ in that it is like something achieved by being constantly iterated⁷: spoken over and over again. We are 'gendered' by social processes as soon as we are born (sometimes before). This is not a voluntarist process, it is not a freely chosen 'performance' (although Butler confused her case by speaking of gender as performance in her early writing⁸). We must produce – or 'speak' – ourselves as gendered according to how we have been interpellated⁹. For Butler we are interpellated in a matrix of power, as Foucault calls it, which is heterosexuality. (I will explore this second half of her formulation below in § 2.5.)

⁴ Something material in Althusser's sense: "Of course, the material existence of the ideology in an apparatus and its practices does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving-stone or a rifle. But, at the risk of being taken for a Neo-Aristotelian (NB Marx had a very high regard for Aristotle), I shall say that 'matter is discussed in many senses', or rather that it exists in different modalities, all rooted in the last instance in 'physical' matter." Cited in Butler, 1993, endnote 13, p.252.

⁵ "One is not born a woman, one becomes it."

⁶ We should note that Butler talks of 'gender as performative' rather than saying 'gender is a performative'. In the first place, this emphasizes gender as a dynamic process rather than a fixed entity. Secondly, it suggests a looser comparison rather than a pin-pointing of actual status.

⁷ This word derives from the Latin *itero*, *-are*, which means to do something over and over again but is especially used of words. It is particularly appropriate for Butler's idea of gender because there is a faint suggestion in it of compulsion; it means that we *must* do gender over and over again.

⁸ I am indebted to Nina Rapi for drawing my attention to this point.

⁹ This word derives from the Latin *interpello*, *-are*, which means to interrupt a speaker. It has come to mean making an appeal through interrupting speech. Althusser's use of the term as a passive suggests we are called into being as appeals to be, which are made as interruptions of discourse.

2.2 Performance as a metaphor

Confusion over the two meanings of ‘to perform’ as in ‘to do’ and ‘to act a dramatic role’ has troubled Butler’s theory of gender. Here I will look briefly at examples of how the social sciences have used the term in both meanings, arguing that to think of social life as a ‘dramatic performance’ is not helpful, whereas using the term performance to mean ‘a realm of doing’ is.

The idea of social life as performance is best known in the work of Erving Goffman. Goffman is often cited as a key thinker in ‘performativity’ but to try to draw on his work in my thesis would only confuse matters. It’s important for my analyses of the black and gay performance work I reference not to make any suggestion that social life could be a performance as in a voluntarist process.

The performances I work with have a much more sophisticated understanding of the generation and iteration of identity than the popular misunderstanding of ‘queer’ which understands Butler’s formulation to read ‘gender is a performance’ and thinks ‘gender-bending’ can be played with without serious repercussions. My thesis is based in the radical¹⁰ queer theory, which follows Althusser in thinking of us all as interpellated. Queer theory understands that interpellation to take place in a social world where the regulation of norms – against which we might be interpellated – is conducted using both psychic and physical violence.

The death of the pre-operative trans-sexual Venus Xtravaganza documented in Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*, exemplifies the violence with which gender is patrolled. Most commentators (Butler, for example) assume that Xtravaganza, who was found strangled under a motel bed, was killed by a client who had discovered her ‘little secret’ (her penis) i.e. she died because she transgressed against social assumptions of a homologous sex/gender. Peggy Phelan, however, points out that women are often murdered in sex-related attacks, and that Xtravaganza may have been killed because she passed for a

¹⁰ My use of the word ‘radical’ as a political approach draws on its meaning as one that goes to the roots in order to change things. Radical queer theory seeks to understand how identification works with the end aim of subversion.

woman too well (Phelan, 1993). Whether or not (biological) sex was part of the motive for the murder, Xtravaganza's gender must have played a part. As I will argue in Chapter Five, a freely chosen and performed gender could never call us into being so strongly that we would be willing to *risk our lives* either as 'biological' or as 'trans-sexual' women. To think of social life as a performance is not, then, helpful.

Victor Turner – also an important figure in the field of 'performativity' – cites both Goffman and a different and more useful use of the term 'performance' meaning 'a realm of doing' in Noam Chomsky's work (Turner, 1986). Chomsky's linguistic theory argues for a distinction between 'competence' – the ideal grammar fixed in our brains, and 'performance' – the imperfect, ungrammatical, actual utterances we make, full of mistakes. Turner, in what he describes as a 'postmodern turn' of thinking, suggests that performance is the richer source of analysis. Citing Sally Moore's *Law as Process*, he talks of a Heraclitean flux of social elements, straining towards order and harmony.

Chomsky's ideal 'grammar' or set of regulations, from which is generated a 'performance', which though full of mistakes is still the arena where communication actually takes place, helps clarify Butler's concept of an ideal sex/gender match to which we aspire. The formation of identity is always built around ideals, as de Beauvoir argues (de Beauvoir, 1949, p.25). For example, in *Formations of Class and Gender*, Beverley Skeggs writes of the bourgeois ideal of femininity which her participants aspire to be. Ideals of femininity, masculinity, black masculinity, black lesbian femininity, are impossible to realise. It is in the imperfect process of attempting to 'do' the match between our selves and the ideal, a process in which we make many mistakes, that our identity actually takes on form. *Errare humanum est* (it is human to make mistakes).

2.3 Ritual: classic anthropological theory

In the next three sections I will explore a realm which I think of as both a 'realm of doing' and dramatic in character. Ritual is a realm in which emotions and the body are primary and a part of discourse in which identity is explicitly

generated. It is worth recovering a full and precise definition of ritual in order to fully understand this. I will then explore Butler's full formulation 'gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix' through a classic ethnographic account of a ritual, before moving to contemporary ethnographic accounts (from sociology) of ritual in London. These will give some sense of background to my participants' lived experience and provide material for my argument that their performance material cannot be ritual in character.

The academic analysis of ritual may be said to date from the publication of Arnold van Gennep's *Rites de Passage* (1908). An accumulation of descriptive accounts of 'magico-religious' acts (e.g. J.G. Frazer's twelve volume collection *The Golden Bough*) had reached a stage which van Gennep talks of as allowing classification "consistent with the progress of science" (van Gennep, 1980, p.xxv)¹¹. van Gennep's study concentrates on rites of passage. He showed an "underlying arrangement" to all rites of passage (which was expanded subsequently to all rituals). van Gennep saw rites of passage moving through three stages: *rites of separation*, *rites of transition* (the liminal or threshold stage), and *rites of incorporation* back into the social body.

Victor Turner, who brought out the crucial nature of symbols in ritual, and related ritual to performance, is perhaps the most significant thinker on ritual after van Gennep. Turner was strongly influenced by the work of Max Gluckman. Gluckman (working in the 1930s with the Zulu of Natal, and later in Barotseland) discusses "rituals of rebellion": inverted and transvestite behaviour in rituals, such as women encouraged to be aggressive, or to wear men's clothing on special ritual occasions. He suggests that ritual expresses not a comfortable cohesion and solidarity, but "unity despite conflicts", that ritual can allow for the expression of frustration by the socially disempowered¹². (This conceptualisation bears a similarity to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival which I will discuss

¹¹ Some anthropologists have worked in a sort of Linnaean paradigm, sorting different societies into a scale of best / least civilised. These include van Gennep and Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* but not Victor Turner, for whom "in matters of religion, as of art, there are no "simpler" peoples, only some peoples with simpler technologies than our own" (Turner, 1969, p.3).

¹² Critics of Gluckman (e.g. Norbeck) point out that he makes no mention of male transvesticism, which can't be an expression of political frustration at disempowerment.

below.) In Gluckman's work we can see ritual generating sociality. For Gluckman, ritual generates a sense of "unity despite conflicts"; the illusion of social cohesion in the face of chaotic and fractured relations, a realm of Chomsky's 'competence' in which we can perform collectivity.

Both Gluckman and Turner also discuss the possibilities of seeing ritual as a form of psycho-analytic process. This would open ritual up to analysis of identification in the way that the triangle: psycho-analytic theory/performance/theories of identification, has encouraged thought (e.g. Phelan, 1993). (However, we should be wary of seeing one culture's cultural processes as simplistically equivalent to another's: ritual as a 'primitive' form of psycho-analysis.)

Turner began his career championing the study of religion and ritual:

In the social sciences generally, it is, I think, becoming widely recognized that religious beliefs and practices are something more than "grotesque" reflections or expressions of economic, political, and social relationships; rather are they coming to be seen as decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about those relationships, and about the natural and social environments in which they operate.

Turner, 1969, p.6.

We could argue that in the same way performance is currently coming to be seen as key to understanding how people think and feel in a discursive realm of political, emotional and social relationships.

Turner began working with the Ndembu of Zambia but he was later to study performance (theatre) in North America. He argues that van Gennep's work on rites of transition – especially the concept of liminality, can be expanded to all rituals (Turner, 1982, p.24). For van Gennep, only rites of *passage*: rituals which move individuals from one social status to another, have the three part structure removing the individual from society, leaving h/er on the 'threshold' (liminal stage), and reincorporating h/er in the new social status. *Fig. 1* shows Turner's argument that theatre moves from separation through liminality to reaggregation, in schematic form.

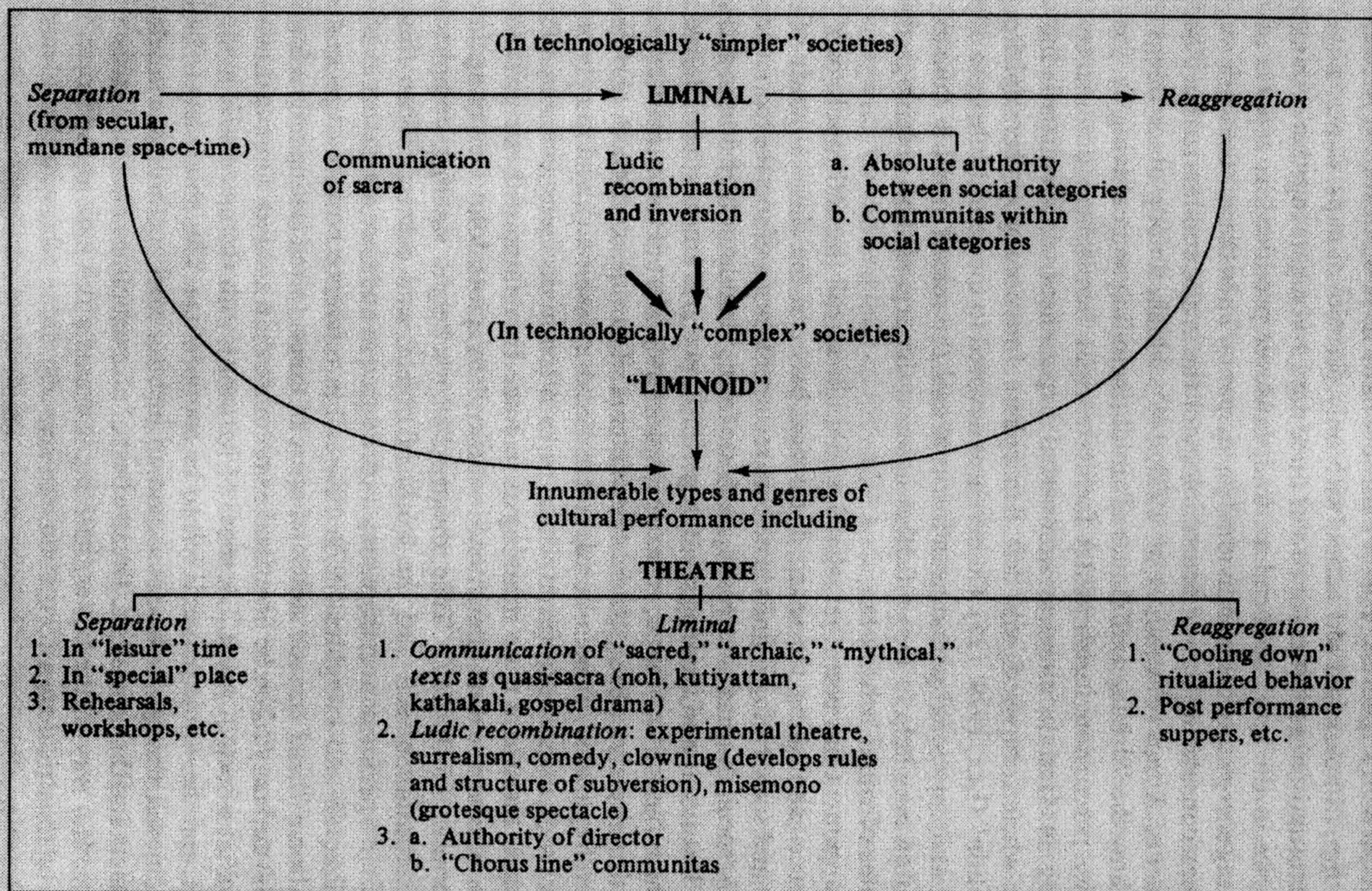


Figure 1.2 The evolution of cultural genres of performance: from "Liminal" to "Liminoïd."

Fig. i. Turner's argument that theatre is ritual (in Schechner and Appel (eds.), 1990, p.14)

In his classic study of Ndembu ritual *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner defines ritual as follows:

By "ritual" I mean prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers. The symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context.

Turner, 1967, p.19.

Ritual for Turner is full of layers of meaning, which at this stage he identified using Jung's reading of "sign" and "symbol", although he added that he completely disagrees with Jung's argument that the collective unconscious is the main formative principle in ritual symbolism.

A sign is an analogous or abbreviated expression of a *known* thing. But a symbol is always the best possible expression of a relatively *unknown* fact, a fact, however, which is none the less recognized or postulated as existing.

Jung cited in Turner, 1967, p.26. (Turner doesn't say whose are the italics.)

(Sign and symbol as defined here are important in understanding how matrices of power operate in political discourse in Chapter Three.)

Rituals are emotive occasions:

norms and values become saturated with emotion, while the gross and basic emotions become ennobled through contact with social values.

Turner, 1967, p.30.

Characteristic of his time, Turner expresses a value judgement of emotions as gross and basic. Emotions: the visceral, those ambiguities¹³ which are neither of the body nor of the mind, are ennobled in ritual by something more clearly of the mind: social values, while norms and values are merely 'saturated' with emotion. We must transcend this Cartesian judgement in order to fully benefit from Turner's definition of ritual. The emotional realm is where our being is constituted, and ritual is where being is socially enacted and given a regulative-productive stamp which simultaneously approves and produces, as I will show in this next section: an account of the ritual chisungu.

2.4 'Gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix' generated in the ritual chisungu

The classic anthropological ethnography by Audrey Richards, *Chisungu*, will help establish what ritual is and show how identity is produced (as imperative) through ritual. It will clarify our understanding of Butler's full formulation 'gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix'. Occasionally Butler has suggested that gender is a ritual (Butler, 1993, p.95). As I will show here, gender is not a ritual but *produced through* ritual (as discourse). I will also draw on another anthropologist: Pierre Bourdieu, to clarify this complex theory

¹³ Douglas identifies the immense importance of ambiguity in *Purity and Danger*.

which has been crucial in my understanding of the politics and processes of identification.

Audrey Richards's background was that of structural-functionalism, but her study *Chisungu* also fits into the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Richards accounts for chisungu as follows:

The contradiction between the masterful male and the submissive son-in-law, between the secure young married woman backed by her own relations and the submissive kneeling wife, is one which first struck me forcibly in the chisungu ceremony. This contradiction, I think, finds expression and perhaps resolution in the chisungu which might be regarded as an extreme expression of the dilemma of a matrilineal society in which men are dominant but the line goes through the woman.

Richards, 1956, pp.50-51.

Chisungu is an individual nubility rite, preceded by a short puberty ceremony and closely associated with marriage. It was the ritual through which girls moved to the social status of young women in Bemba society. Nowadays it has been lost apart from Richards's record of the ceremony and collections of the pottery and photographs of the pottery associated with the ritual. Potent and dangerous areas of Bemba life (sex, fire and blood) were represented in the ritual, as were aspects of the hierarchical social structure and of gender politics in marriage. Some of the rites in chisungu included making pottery figures, singing certain songs, learning secret words, ritual actions (e.g. leaping over a branch). The ritual in which Richards took part lasted several days. This was longer than most chisungu ceremonies of the time (because Richards had funded some necessary items such as beer), but she was given to understand that it was a shortened version.

Richards argues that there are two kinds of purpose in ritual: expressed [by the participants] and deduced [by the anthropologist]. There are primary and secondary expressed purposes. The primary expressed purpose of chisungu was to 'teach' the girls to be women – I discuss this below. A secondary expressed purpose was the women getting together for fun.

Deduced purposes included the expression of a relationship to tribal dogmas and values; this was the occasion on which a girl was given her fire and

her marriage pot; high infant mortality rates were reflected in heavy emphasis on fertility and childcare practices; the importance the Bemba give to hierarchical status seemed to be expressed in songs saying e.g. “the armpit is not higher than the shoulder”. While she is generally critical of Gluckman, Richards argues that the concept of ritual as psycho-analytic process might be useful. She speculates on whether *chisungu* expressed and alleviated tensions raised in a male-dominated society structured by matriliney and practising uxori-local marriage.

Richards discusses very fully what the Bemba meant by ‘teaching’ the girls to be women. (She argues that most anthropological studies pay too little attention to the effects of ritual on “role aspirants”.) The Bemba women placed great emphasis on the fact that the girls were being taught: “We make them clever” – the word used here is *ukubacenjela*, which Richards translates as “the causative form of the verb ‘to be intelligent and socially competent and to have a knowledge of etiquette’,” (Richards, 1956, p.125). At first, Richards admits, she misunderstood what was meant by “teaching” the girls:

I must admit that their emphasis on this function of the *chisungu* and their use of the word *ukufunda*, which they now commonly employ for European school teaching, at first misled me. Even after fairly wide comparative reading on the subject I began to imagine that the candidates had at least some direct instruction on some subject or other at some time during the ceremony. I confess to a mental picture of the girls sitting in the initiation hut and listening to talks from an old woman on what might be called in the modern idiom ‘marriage guidance’.

Richards, 1956, p.126. (Richards’s italics.)

Richards adds that Bemba girls were practising the *activities* of womanhood: helping with gardening, housework and childcare, and even having sex, from a very early age and had no need for instruction in these areas. What the girls in fact learnt in *chisungu* were secret terms. Some were women’s words only used during *chisungu*. Girls were also said to be taught a secret language of marriage.

Richards goes on to suggest:

A girl may have little intellectual understanding of what is being done at the time of her chisungu, although she may be in a highly emotional state in which she is likely to be suggestible to the general emphasis laid on the importance of marriage and childbirth.

Richards, 1956, p.128.

and also:

An intelligent *nacimbusa* will admit that the girls know how to cook and grind but will say that after her chisungu a young girl does her work in a different way.

Richards, 1956, p.128. (Richards's italics.)

Reading *Chisungu* through Butler, I would argue that the ritual of chisungu generated women from the amorphous material of girlhood. Compare the ritual to Butler's account of the 'girling' of a new born baby when its gender is declared by the doctor. Butler is discussing how the subject engages in 'gender as performative':

Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.

Butler, 1993, p.7.

She suggests we should "ask after the conditions of [the subject's] emergence and operation".

Consider the medical interpellation which ... shifts an infant from an "it" to a "she" or a "he", and in that naming; the girl is "girded", brought into a domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender.

ibid.

Just as the medical interpellation calls the infant into girlhood, the "it" into being as a "she", chisungu calls uncertain, awkward young girls into being as dignified young women:

the phrase 'rite of transition' began to have a new meaning for me when I remembered the dirty frightened exhausted creatures who had been badgered and pushed through the chisungu weeks, and compared them with these demure and shy young brides. They begged for little presents. Later I watched them kneel and clap obeisance outside each hut in the village. 'They are submitting themselves to the elders' was Nangoshye's proud comment. 'They show they are willing to work for us.'

Richards, 1956, p.109.

It seems likely ... that these rites are the means by which the girl publicly accepts her new legal role.

ibid., p.129.

Chisungu is not only closely associated with the Bemba marriage ceremony but full of references to marriage, e.g. the learning of the secret language of marriage¹⁴. Continuing to follow Butler, we can argue that this reflects the way in which sex/gender is interpellated in the matrix of heterosexuality (“a domain of language and kinship”, as she describes it). For a full understanding of how this intersection of two discursive modulations of power (gender and sexuality) operate, I will turn to Pierre Bourdieu. Various aspects of Bourdieu’s work are important in my thesis. I will later show that his work on class fits with my participants’ understanding of class politics. The concept of *doxa* which I reproduce here will help my analysis both of New Right discourse in my his/herstory, and of feminists’ efforts to comprehend race politics in Chapter Five.

So far I have relied on Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic for an understanding of how black and gay people are positioned, but my first ideas on the subject were based in Bourdieu’s concept of *doxa*. I was struck by the fact that in *doxa* the orthodox (Self) and heterodox (Other) are not separate but depend on each other in a discursive realm. This is compatible with Butler’s and Sedgwick’s thinking in queer theory: that a dominant heterosexuality (orthodox) is dependent on the abjected figure of the homosexual (heterodox)¹⁵.

¹⁴ There are references to other social relations such as sister-brother, and even relationships which develop from chisungu, e.g. the nacimbusa will be the midwife, and Richards describes her as often becoming a god-mother figure, to her initiate’s children. I am wary of making an ethnocentric reading that sees the expression of a heterosexual matrix of power as dominant for the Bemba in the 1930s just as it is in Western European societies now. (See historian Lawrence Stone and anthropologist Alan Macfarlane for studies of the West European historical nature of the nuclear family and ‘romantic love complex’.) However, while there may be evidence that other forms of social relations were important to the Bemba at this time which are not socially crucial in current British socio-political structures, so that marriage and heterosexuality may not have dominated quite to the extent that they do here and now, it seems clear that they were still of fundamental importance.

¹⁵ It’s a little awkward that the meaning of *hetero* – different, should clash in an account of those who are orthodox in having different sex relationships (heterosexual) and those who are thought of as the Different Ones (heterodox) because they have same sex relationships (homosexual).

In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977)¹⁶, Bourdieu draws the following representation of discourse¹⁷:

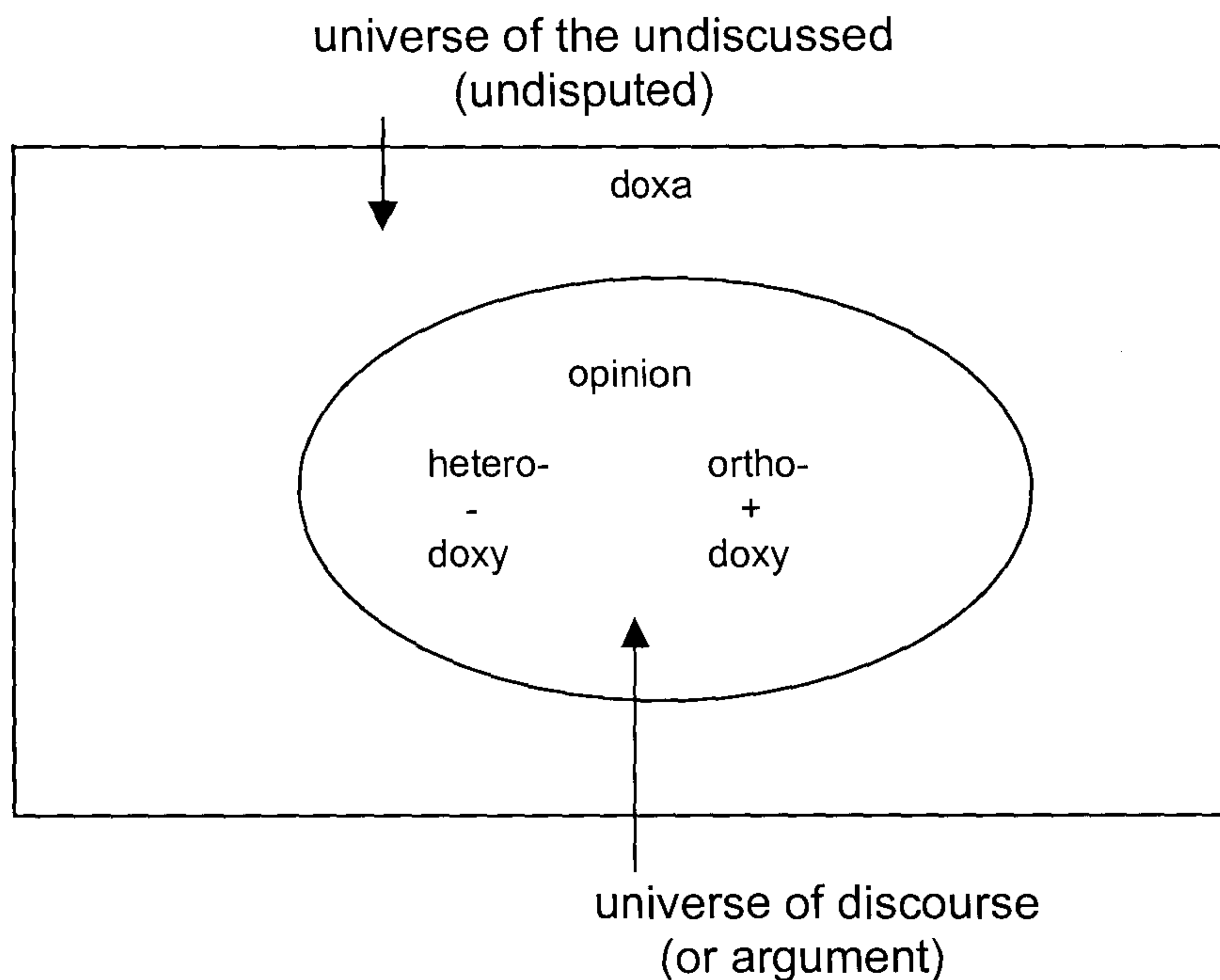


Fig. ii: Doxa, from Bourdieu, 1977, p. 168.

He suggests that everything open to discussion in society is contained by a much larger field never put into question:

Systems of classification which reproduce, in their own specific logic, the objective classes, i.e. the divisions by sex, age, or position in the relations of production, make their specific contribution to the reproduction of the power relations of which they are a product, by securing the misrecognition, and hence the recognition, of the arbitrariness on which they are based: in the extreme case, that is to say, when there is a quasi-perfect

¹⁶ I rely on Richard Nice's translation of *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique: précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle* which incorporates changes Bourdieu had made since the original publication.

¹⁷ Bourdieu's formulation bears a resemblance to Foucault's concepts of discourse and matrices of power. However, Bourdieu's formulation suggests a thin, surface layer of discourse overlying *doxa*, the universe of the undiscussed. This figure of surface overlying depth appears in other areas of Bourdieu's work, for example in the way in which *habitus* derives from fields. It can perhaps be seen as a vestigial trace of structuralism and discarded. For Foucault, there is no deep layer below a surface layer, only one field of discourse through which matrices of power proliferate. I think we can sustain the idea of one field of discourse, while understanding that within it matrices of power sometimes succeed in appearing natural because they are temporarily hidden behind other parts of discourse. As I will argue below, bringing Bourdieu and Foucault together will allow us to bring the body into postmodern thought.

correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization (as in ancient societies) the natural and social world appears as self-evident.

Bourdieu, 1977, p.164.

Areas of life assumed to be self-evident and *a priori*, Bourdieu nominates *doxa*. He argues that they derive from a dichotomous social structure in which what is disputed – in binary terms: orthodoxy and heterodoxy¹⁸ – mirrors what cannot be disputed in such a perfect manner that it never occurs to the social actor to question *doxa*. What is visibly divided and openly available for questioning are ranks of sex, age and “position in the relations of production”. Judith Butler’s formulation of a power matrix of heterosexuality, which is underpinned by the male/female binary of sex/gender is an example of *doxa*:

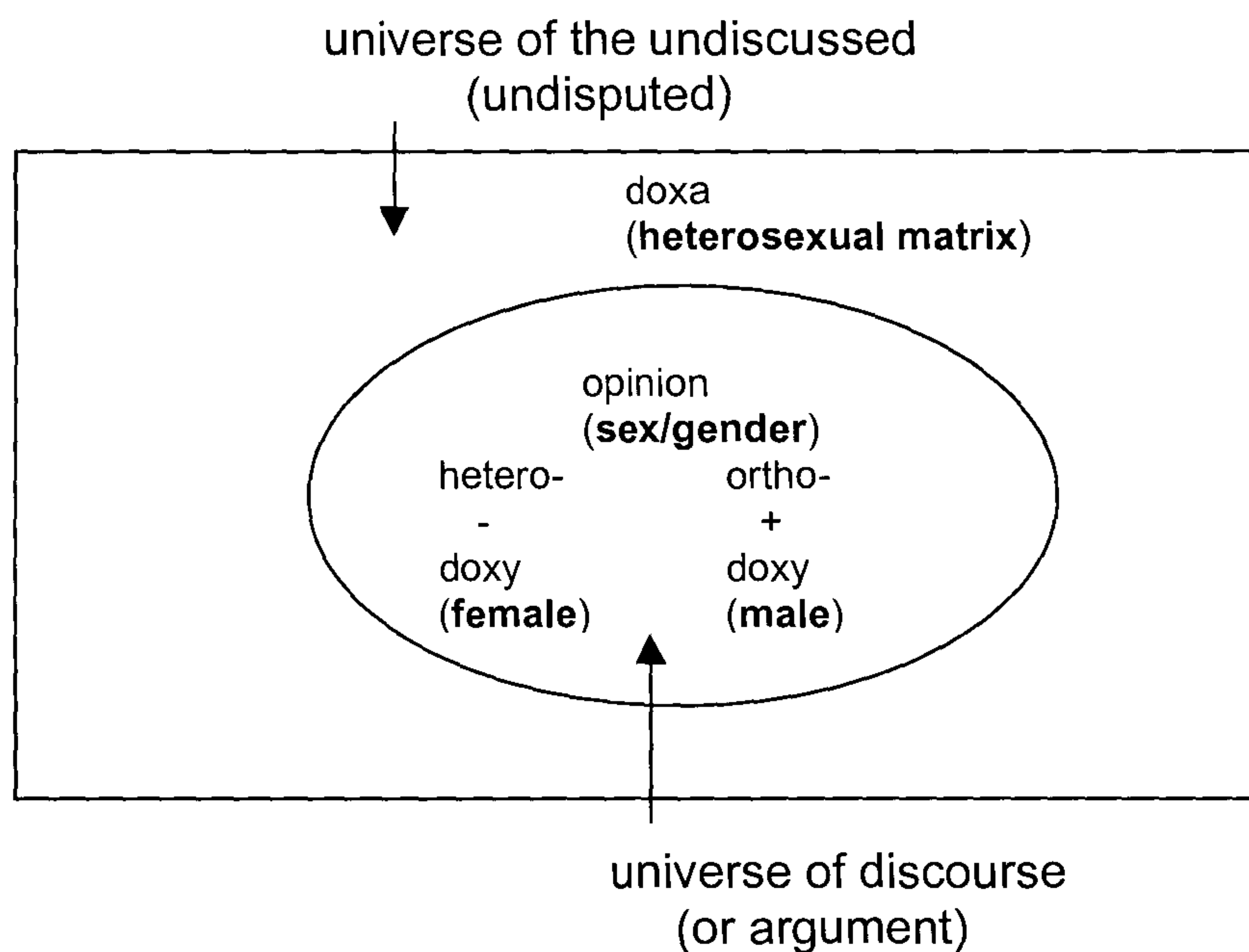


Fig. iii: Butler's 'gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix' in diagrammatic form adapted from Bourdieu, 1977.

Unpicking the workings of Butler’s formulation inside Bourdieu’s figure shows how heterosexuality hides the fact that it defines itself through an “argument” with an abjected figure of homosexuality. (By arguing that they are

¹⁸ We might call this a dialectic, but it doesn’t fit in a teleological programme. The synthesis produced between orthodoxy and heterodoxy doesn’t go on to become a new orthodoxy. Discourse and *doxa* simply continue to be generated by the interaction of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

not-homosexual, heterosexuals constitute being as heterosexual. See Rubin, 1972, Butler, 1990 and Sedgwick, 1990, on the necessary and hidden figure of the homosexual in heterosexuality.) Heterosexuality interpellates us as male and female so as to fit us into its way of working. A “universe of argument” between male and female has a quasi-perfect correspondence with, and therefore hides, the “argument” heterosexuality/homosexuality. A heterosexual matrix of power is assumed to be self-evident, *a priori* and natural because its “argument” with homosexuality, and therefore the figure of homosexuality as well, is hidden behind an “argument” between male/female. We think that we were created as men and women and so we must naturally be heterosexual, but in fact powerful heterosexual discourse will allow us to be iterated only as men or women. We can’t step outside this discourse. To refuse to be male/female is to refuse to be human, as Butler argues (Butler, 1993, p.8) and as I will discuss more fully in Chapter Five.

The impact of a discursive complex of gender and sexuality as represented in *fig. iii* can be traced through effects like the invisibility of lesbian relationships (see Faderman, 1981). The argument male/female which valorises male as positive and active over female as negative and passive, fits over the argument heterosexuality (positive, active) / homosexuality (negative, passive). The female homosexual is a double passive in this “universe”, and hence impossible – as Queen Victoria famously declared when asked to legislate against lesbian practice.

2.5 Ritual: sociological accounts of 1990s London

In this section I will move to sociological accounts of ritual in 1990s London. This will provide a background to my participants’ lives and work. I will show how the black and the queer are explicitly excluded and repudiated in many forms of ritual. This argument informs my discussion of whether black and gay performance is ritual, as Turner would argue.

First I will give a very brief account of a 'normal' British ritual. I will then consider an account of ritual which at first sight would appear to have nothing in common with black and gay communities: Millwall Football Club fan-dom. Thirdly, I will look at Les Back's study of urban youth in South London communities (which will figure again in my discussion of race and class politics in Chapter Six).

In covering the 1997 State Opening of Parliament, the presenter David Dimbleby explicitly named it a 'ritual' (BBC1, 14.5.97). Popular understanding overemphasises the link between ritual and religion and would rather think of the ceremonials in a church or mosque than of the opening of parliament as ritual. For an understanding of the political processes I discuss in Chapter Three, it's important to show that government takes place through rituals.

There are many references in the long opening ceremony of parliament to religion, from the 'cap of maintenance', originally given to the monarch by the pope, to verbal references to the power invested in the actors by God. In addition, there is the structure. Parliament is dissolved; separated from the social body; and is being reincorporated. During this liminal stage, any threat to disrupt proceedings can have extraordinary power. At the 1982 State Opening, 40 Labour MPs refused to allow Black Rod (the ceremonial bearer of a black staff who walks from the House of Lords to the House of Commons) into the House of Commons until the then Minister Michael Heseltine withdrew unpopular housing legislation. Heseltine was obliged to do so, because if the ritual hadn't been completed parliament couldn't have been reincorporated into society. In this moment of crisis we can see clearly the power and importance of entering the emotional realm of ritual to reaffirm values and norms; to generate social being. Heseltine couldn't refuse to withdraw the legislation. The ritual procession of Black Rod through the two Houses had to be performed in order for Parliament to be reconvened.

In his PhD thesis, *'No One Likes Us, We Don't Care': Millwall Football Club, Community and Identity*, Garry Robson advances the argument that fans' participation at football games can be ritual. Both Millwall fandom and black gay

performance happen in social collectivities where belonging is articulated through discursive accounts of sex/gender, sexuality, race and class. However Millwall fandom is constituted through a ritualised hatred of the black and the queer, among other identities.

Robson draws on Paul Connerton and Pierre Bourdieu to develop his analysis of the ritual character of Millwall FC fans' songs, chants and embodied practices. For Connerton, ritual emerges from what Maurice Halbwachs calls 'social memory'. In anthropology, we might say ritual is rooted in tradition. Robson shows how Millwall FC are situated in a particular South London historical tradition. From Bourdieu, Robson takes the important insight that "ritualisation", as Bourdieu calls it, always arises out of everyday consciousness and practice¹⁹. Robson remarks:

It is the central purpose of ritual language and communication ... not to somehow discursively represent particular social or moral forms and the identities located in them, but to operationalise, enact and *experience* them.

Robson, 1998, p.271 (Robson's italics).

He describes how watching a game is about *being* Millwall as a collective body. At times, the Millwall fans break spontaneously into songs or chants which reiterate (re-affirm/generate) Millwall fans as a collectivity: white, male and working-class in symbolic opposition to the Other football team, who are usually characterised as effeminate or ersatz cockneys or any of a range of semantic categories which help establish that *We are Millwall, we are the best*. That these categories are purely symbolic in precisely the way that Roland Barthes identifies the flag as symbolic in the *Paris Match* picture of a black French soldier saluting the French national flag (Barthes, 1957) can be seen in that while Millwall fans have a well established tradition of racism which works to constitute their whiteness, Millwall includes black fans and players. That it plays a symbolic role does not, however, mitigate the actual corrosiveness of Millwall racism.

¹⁹ The church ceremony which many British people would think of as ritual will not fall into this category if it is merely a habitual activity undertaken every seven days with no resonance in daily life.

Les Back's *New Ethnicities and Urban Cultures* is an account of urban youth culture in Britain which, like Robson's study, can be drawn on to show how the black and the queer are often repudiated in ritual. Although he talks at length about black music and dance cultures, he doesn't reference the concept of ritual to do so. Back uses ritual to come to an understanding of name-calling between young men. In these name-calling and shoving 'games', young white men sometimes draw on racist abuse, at which their black peers take serious offence. The young white men protest that it is 'only a game'. Back describes these name-calling games as ritual duelling play. This would place them alongside such ethnographies as Rasmussen's 1922 account of Eskimo song duels, summarised here by Keesing:

each party to the dispute composes songs that ridicule his adversary and set out in exaggerated fashion his grievance or his version of the disputed events. Ribald satire, taunts, innuendo, distortion, and buffoonery bring mirth from the onlookers as the songs go back and forth. By the time the "case" has been made by each party, the litigants have blown off steam and public opinion has swung towards a decision.

Keesing, 1981, p.326.

Back shows how, when they reference racism in this ritual play, young white men go too far. They step into a discourse of social power which is too big for the identity struggles of peer play. Young black men refuse to 'play' any more.

What he also shows, however, is the character of everyday ritual play in young people's lives. These name-calling games reference social power in discourse to establish identity and hierarchy. They do so through abuse and in the realm of emotions such as anger and pain. (As all initiation rituals know, nothing marks us as efficiently as pain.) Given this, it's inevitable that the discourse of race will be referenced, to reiterate, reaffirm, generate social values and norms. The discourse of race, however, constitutes (at least) two groups: black and white. (This is the case whether it is being articulated by white racists or in the cause of black cultural pride.) When it's referenced in name-calling games, instead of generating social cohesion (as Gluckman argues ritual does), it generates the division into black and white communities. Back shows how

some long-term friendships break down over what the young white men call 'only a game'. This isn't a particularly surprising event in a heavily racialised social world such as that of the South London estates where Back worked. The role of ritual, then, is to reaffirm social values regardless of whether they are worth reaffirming and regardless of the personal preferences of social actors. The young men, if asked, might say they would prefer to be friends; but to truly belong in these white South London communities, young white men must take on, iterate and generate a social code of racism²⁰. That they do so in the context of a name-calling ritual reveals the significance of ritual in the politics of everyday living. Homophobic name-calling is a similar ritual practice of psychic violence which asserts social values (see Mac an Ghail, 1994, pp.166-8 for homophobic practices in schools and creative responses by gay teenagers).

Back gives one example (in a footnote) of violent homophobic attack in South London, drawn from an account in Isaac Julien's film *The Darker Side of Black* (1994). In this account, David Dibosa describes being attacked in the street:

I and my boyfriend were hospitalised by people who I had felt had been my neighbours and friends.
quoted Back, 1996, p.270.

Dibosa's account reveals a violent rift in the neighbourhood discourse which Back is examining. This experience can no longer be thought of as ritual duelling play, it is a breakdown in social order resulting in the violent repudiation of someone who thought of himself as one of the local community. This attack is based on the same social principles being iterated in black music of the time. Dibosa begins his account:

In terms of my own personal experience music such as *Boom Bye Bye* has shouted homophobia from the roof tops.
ibid.

It is in this context that my participants are creating their work, and because of the way in which they are repudiated by social values reproduced as

²⁰ Back also gives us an account by 'Debbie'. In order to continue to socialise with black friends, Debbie has to struggle with opposition from her white racist family and community.

incorporated knowledge in ritual, they are often unable to do so in ritual forms of performance like football or community-based music. Following van Gennep, Gluckman and Robson, I would argue that it is a central purpose of ritual not to discursively represent social or moral forms and the identities located in them, but to iterate, reaffirm, generate social being. It is, however, a central purpose of performance to discursively represent social and moral forms. As I will argue in my next section, this inherently political and yet 'open' space offers the perfect arena in which to unpack and replay the politics and processes of identification which must be reiterated without question in ritual.

2.6 What is 'dramatic performance'?

While definition of performance as 'a realm of doing' is unproblematic across the linguists who use it (Austin, Chomsky), definition of 'dramatic performance' (particularly black British performance) has been subject to much debate. Here I will explain why I include photography as 'performance' material and what it is about performance that enables it to convey so effectively knowledge about identification.

Peggy Phelan's thinking on gender and performance, particularly in her *unmarked: the politics of performance*, has been critical in the framing of my thinking about the performance material I work with. Phelan draws on psychoanalytic theory and the work of Derrida (in Chapter Five I will suggest she can be thought of as a queer theorist). She describes a unique moment of the unrepeatable live performance which disappears into memory and invisibility, away from regulation and control (Phelan, 1993, p.148). She argues that there is a performance moment even in sculpture and painting, using the example of Sophie Calle's work. In the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum, Boston, Calle put up spectators' descriptions from memory of paintings that had been stolen – suggesting that the art 'really' exists in the disappearing moment of interaction with the viewer. Phelan's definition allows us to work with photography and films – media which Paul Gilroy would not agree to define as 'performance'. For Gilroy:

Where performance cultures have passed over the threshold into the space where visibility dominates, there is an unavoidable sense of loss, not because the artists involved lack the means to make the transition but because the collaborative input of their circular audiences cannot be adequately communicated. Without their active witnessing no performance can take place.

Gilroy in Ugwu (ed.), 1995, p.32.

Earlier, he puts the case even more forcefully, suggesting that it's only in face to face "real time" performance that a trivialising commercialisation can be resisted:

The assertion of real time resists the processes of reduction and commodification on which the globalised meta-market relies.

Gilroy in Ugwu (ed.), 1995, p.24.

He compares "the inviolable integrity of face-to-face interaction" with "pseudo-performance".

Phelan as well as Gilroy sees performance as defined by the moment of audience participation. The difference in their thinking lies not in whether the *audience* must be present for there to be performance, but rather whether the *artist* must be present *in the body*. I would argue that while performance does depend on the "collaborative input" of the audience, it can anticipate such collaboration so that the artist's body need not be physically present (in the material modality which Althusser would call that of a paving-stone or rifle – cited Butler, 1993, endnote 13, p.252) to respond and evoke response. (This doesn't mean art always anticipates collaboration. Sometimes "visibility" does dominate.) Rather than the *artist's body* having to be materially present, I suggest that *incorporated knowledge* must be shared to engage the full collaboration of the audience. I will discuss this further in relation to my participants' performance material, especially in Chapter Seven.

For cultural critics working with black British art as I am doing here, it is axiomatic that black performance is political:

We must begin therefore with the black artist as a public figure – a figure in public politics.

Gilroy, 1988 (reprinted in Gilroy, 1993b), p.98.

we should turn attention to the conditions under which the story was told and how these conditions determine its telling.

Mercer, 1994, p.235.

However Phelan, in what we might see as a Foucauldian understanding, views all performances as inherently political in the sense that they are always already about power. In a comparison of Mira Schor's paintings and Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, Phelan remarks:

Schor's work argues that female subjectivities, in fact and in representation, always confront what it costs to live with and without men, and with and without their representations of us. The contrary labor of living with and without women is blissfully absent from Mapplethorpe's work, and that to me is finally what is so shocking about his photography. The critique of culture undertaken by Schor is much more subversive of sexual "normality" than the explicitly "perverse" poses of Mapplethorpe's naked men.

Phelan, 1993, p.60.

In the same way that Mapplethorpe can unthinkingly erase women from those of his photographs where they are not physically present, while Schor can never escape some reference to men, white performance may "blissfully" (ignorantly) ignore blackness while black performance must always reference whiteness.

Phelan's view that performance is an inherently political space takes us beyond subject-matter into the dynamics of performance. Cornel West notes that "art can constitute a public space that is perceived by people as empowering rather than disempowering" (cited, hooks in Ugwu (ed.), 1995, p.214). For people such as those from the black and gay communities, the suspension of disbelief in the world of art means that performance is a space where it's possible to suspend the rules and values of hegemonic discourse. For a short space of time, alternative spheres of power may be modelled. bell hooks describes this potential here in relation to a constrictive "movement for racial uplift":

Performance was important because it created a cultural context where one could transgress the boundaries of accepted speech, both in relationship to the dominant white culture, and to the decorum of African-American cultural mores. Although not talked about as much as it should be, the movement for racial uplift that had its roots in nineteenth century black bourgeois culture, placed such a premium on decorum and correct behaviour that it restricted speech and action. Performance practice was one of the places where the boundaries created by the emphasis on proving the black race was not uncivilised could be disrupted.

hooks in Ugwu (ed.), 1995, p.212.

Phelan sounds a warning note. A chapter on anti-abortion activism shows how the emotive power and political dynamics in performance can be utilised in right-wing as much as left-wing politics. At pro-life demonstrations outside abortion clinics, men cry: “Mommy, mommy, don’t kill me!” as women walk past into the clinic, in a vicious re-assertion of male privilege through a performance as victims. We should understand black performance, then, not as inherently political but as utilising the inherently political space of performance in radical rather than neo-conservative ways.

For Phelan,

Performance is capable of resisting the reproduction of metaphor, and the metaphor I’m most interested in resisting is the metaphor of gender, a metaphor which upholds the vertical hierarchy of value through systematic marking of the positive and negative.

Phelan, 1993, p.151.

The “metaphor of gender” bears a close resemblance to Butler’s ‘gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix’. ‘Gender as performative’ gives a better idea of gender as an active process – a ‘doing’, rather than the passive, structuralist idea embodied in the “metaphor of gender” and ‘the heterosexual matrix’ is a more precise specification of a “vertical hierarchy of value”. However, in “a systematic marking of the positive and negative” that is male/female Phelan offers a (Lacanian) understanding of the mechanisms through which gender as performative operates in the heterosexual matrix: positive and negative; marked [with value] and therefore invisible, and unmarked so visibilised as Other: woman, black, gay. Phelan shows how, because they are marked with social value, male or white subject positions appear to be ‘normal’ in discourse which supports masculine or white values; they melt into the background, become invisible. Female or black subject positions become the ‘Other’ in such discourse, and because they are at odds with normative male or white values, they stand out, are visibilised. In the inherently political yet open space of performance these discursive mechanisms can be resisted and re-presented in a format which exposes their ways of working.

If performance is a space in which resistance to metaphors such as gender (or race²¹) is possible, its application may extend beyond the theatre stage. Thus Gilroy can argue:

Survival in slave regimes or in other extreme conditions intrinsic to colonial order promoted the acquisition of what we might now understand to be performance skills, and refined the appreciation of mimesis by both dominant and dominated.

Gilroy in Ugwu (ed.), 1995, p.14.

People may be obliged to manipulate racial or other identity as masks and props. We may practise a range of social performances in order to survive social violence from exaggerated 'Uncle Tom'²² behaviour, or 'camping it up'²³, to 'passing'²⁴. One of my problems with the Goffman idea of social life as performance is that it suggests there might be a 'real' self beneath the social performance – an idea which the Foucauldian frame in which my work is set won't tolerate. For Foucault there is no surface and depth, only discourse. Gilroy suggests, however, that people may be *forced* to imitate the ideal figure others imagine us to be, it may be safer for a gay man to act like the effeminate figure of ridicule which isn't worth punishing than to present a macho challenge to hetero-normativity.

2.7 Is performance ritual?

Having established definitions of performance and of ritual, I will now show precisely why I argue that the performance material I work with is not ritual in character. First I will show that it is possible to argue, as Turner does, that performance is ritual. This will also enable me to give a summary of studies of African-American literary and oral traditions which – in the absence of British

²¹ An example of race being thought of as metaphor is 'race as a floating signifier' (Mercer, 1990, Hall, 1996).

²² Central character in the North American anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Uncle Tom is a model of the good slave, ultimately beaten to death by a bad owner.

²³ Exaggerated effeminate behaviour.

²⁴ Allowing people to assume you are straight when you are gay or white when you are (light skinned) black.

studies in certain fields²⁵ – has been influential for the development of sociological thinking on black British performance, for example Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s black literary criticism is crucial in my analysis of Patience Agbabi's work in Chapter Four. African-American performance has had a powerful influence on black British performance, in that realm which Gilroy has called the black Atlantic.

In thinking about black languages and literatures, with their respect for oral culture, the concept "orature" developed by Kenyan novelist and director Ngugi wa Thiong'o is useful (cited in Roach, 1996). Orature goes beyond a schematized opposition of literacy and orality, acknowledging that the two have produced each other interactively over time.

2.8 African-American performance as ritual

Studies of African-American 'language' show it to be heavily influenced by people's religions and studies of churches show clergy are conscious of and keen to maintain links to the laity. In Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, the main thesis is the study of 'Black English' in North America as a language²⁶ but in order to properly conduct her study, Smitherman ranges over a wide field of sociological, anthropological and literary material.

She argues that the churches have been of paramount importance in the history of Black America. Comparing 'street raps' to 'church raps', she shows that churches have had a significant influence on African-American discourse. This argument is supported by Gerald L. Davis's study of African-American sermons:

²⁵ Work on the collection and interpretation of 'folklore', 'verbal arts' or 'black discourse' has been under way in the United States for over a hundred years – much longer than work in the younger school of black British cultural studies. The pieces republished in Alan Dundes' *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* show the spread of material across this time period, from Frank D. Banks's and Portia Smiley's "Old-Time Courtship Conversation" originally published in 1895.

²⁶ Smitherman's focus contrasts with that of later work on language practices in Britain. She wants to show that 'Black English' is a separate language rather than a slang or a dialect whereas studies such as Roger Hewitt's *Black Talk, White Talk* or Simon Jones's *Black Culture, White Youth* describe a black/white cultural exchange in the development of language.

if one is to understand the structural complexities of language invention and expressive language forms in African American, it is to the work of the sermon craftsman in performance that one must turn.

Davis, 1985, p.xiv.

Conversely, Smitherman and Davis also show how secular interests of the congregation are of great importance to black churches. This can be seen in the churches' use of (thereby validation of) street speech, and also in the way sermons on religious themes of the promised land and a heavenly life hereafter may be about hopes of freedom in the here and now. (Davis cites a 1956 account by the Rev. James Watson of a Brother Carper's sermon which seems to incorporate advice about a real escape route for slaves. The message in Brother Carper's complex configuration of sign and signifier is emphasized by his reiterated denial of any such hidden purpose.)

Davis suggests that "black language" is ritualistic because of influences from churches other than those purely of style. He quotes Bishop Cleveland, preacher of one of the sermons he analyses:

Preachers are born. They are not called, they are born So a preacher is a preacher, just like I was born Black.

Bishop Cleveland, quoted in Davis, 1985, p.ix.

Bishop Cleveland suggests that leadership in the church and Black identity are equivalent. A preacher is called into being in the same way as a human being is interpellated as black. This implies that the sermon might be equivalent to any form of expression which could speak from the "muted" position of black-ness; both would come from a realm of the body and emotions, a ritual realm.

Like Davis's work, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* aims to uncover "an identifiable African-American aesthetic system" (Davis, 1985, p.xx):

The Signifying Monkey explores the relation of the black vernacular tradition to the Afro-American literary tradition.

Gates, 1988, p.xix.

The "black vernacular tradition" could be described as orature. Gates develops a critical theory of black literature and language practices, called "Signifyin(g)" to reflect the name for the African-American street art of signifyin:

Signifyin(g) is not the only theory appropriate to the texts of our tradition. But it is one that I would like to think arises from the black tradition itself.

Gates, 1988, p.xiv.

Signifyin uses indirect references to make fun of a situation through parody and in ritual duelling play (see articles in Dundes (ed.), 1990, for a full definition). The signifyin poetic duelling play which uses obscene ideas, the 'toast' (The Signifying Monkey and the Dirty Dozens are both 'toasts'), was one of the sources for rap music²⁷. Gates's argument that signifyin is an ironic parody explains how it succeeds in being ritual iteration of a positive sense of black identity in a culture where racism is a dominant social value. By reiterating the cultural values in racist behaviour in an ironic form, practices like signifyin can iterate them without re-generating them.

Having established a specifically black mode of literary criticism, Gates doesn't follow it through black thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright, whose concepts of double consciousness and double vision would match up with the concept of double-voiced discourse which he takes from Mikhail Bakhtin (I will discuss these three concepts fully in Chapter Four). He turns instead to the cultural relativism of a table equating 'Figures of Signification' across different cultures:

²⁷ in which social commentary is made in a strongly rhythmic and rhyming format, often deliberately using offensive language, against backing music.

Chart 4. The Figures of Signification

<i>Rhetorical Trope</i>	<i>Bloom's Revisionary Ratio</i>	<i>Afro-American Signifyin(g) Trope</i>	<i>Classical Yoruba</i>	<i>Lexically Borrowed Yoruba</i>
Irony	Clinamen	Signifyin(g) ("Nigger business" in the West Indies)	<i>Riràn (èràn)</i>	<i>Aironi</i>
Synecdoche	Tesocra	Calling out of one's name	<i>Ihàlé (Èpón)</i>	<i>Mètárimì</i>
Metonymy	Kenosis			
Hyperbole, litotes	Demonization	Stylin' or wootin' ("Flash" in the West Indies)		
Metaphor	Askesis	Naming	{ <i>Afíwé' (elédòò)</i> <i>Afíwé' gúan</i>	<i>Métájà</i> (indirect "naming")* <i>Simili</i> (direct "naming")*
Metalepsis	Apophrades	Capping	<i>Afáán; Àjímò; Èní</i>	

* N.B. "Naming" is an especially rich trope in Yoruba. Positive naming is called *Oríkì*, while negative naming is called *Ìnagíjé*. Naming is also an especially luxurious (if potentially volatile) trope in the Afro-American vernacular tradition. "Naming" someone and "Calling [someone] Out of [his] name" are among the most commonly used tropes in Afro-American vernacular discourse. Scores of proverbs and epigrams in the black tradition turn upon figures for naming.

Fig. iv. "The Figures of Signification" from Gates, 1988, p.87.

In the Preface to *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates discusses the extent to which black people "talk about talking", what he explicitly names "black language rituals":

I think they do it to pass these rituals along from one generation to the next. They do it to preserve the traditions of "the race".

Gates, 1988, p.xi.

He asserts that African-American street speech practices are located in a tradition: one of the anthropological criteria for what is ritual. Gates prefers to take Signifyin(g) back to the mythic Yoruba figure Esu-Elegbara, than to discuss more recent influences of the black church in North America.

The collection of essays on rap music edited by Jon Michael Spencer *The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap* explores links between street art and a religious tradition in the community which may be Christianity or Islam. (William Eric Perkins's article "Nation of Islam Ideology in the Rap of Public Enemy" describes the way in which Nation of Islam's ideology is incorporated into the Public Enemy album *Fear of a Black Planet*, for example the belief that

Chart 4. The Figures of Signification

<i>Rhetorical Trope</i>	<i>Bloom's Revisionary Ratio</i>	<i>Afro-American Signifyin(g) Trope</i>	<i>Classical Yoruba</i>	<i>Lexically Borrowed Yoruba</i>
Irony	Clinamen	Signifyin(g) ("Nigger business" in the West Indies)	<i>Riràn (èràn)</i>	<i>Aírónì</i>
Synecdoche	Tessera	Calling out of one's name	<i>Ihàlè (Èpón)</i>	<i>Mètònimì</i>
Metonymy	Kenosis			
Hyperbole, litotes	Daemonization	Stylin' or wooling ("Flush" in the West Indies)		
Metaphor	Askesis	Naming	{ <i>Àfìwé (èdílòò)</i> <i>Àfìwé gáan</i>	<i>Métájà</i> (indirect "naming")* <i>Similì</i> (direct "naming")*
Metalepsis	Apophrades	Capping	<i>Afíkún; Àjímò; Èní</i>	

* N.B. "Naming" is an especially rich trope in Yoruba. Positive naming is called *Oriki*, while negative naming is called *Inagije*. Naming is also an especially luxurious (if potentially volatile) trope in the Afro-American vernacular tradition. "Naming" someone and "Calling [someone] Out of [his] name" are among the most commonly used tropes in Afro-American vernacular discourse. Scores of proverbs and epigrams in the black tradition turn upon figures for naming.

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Africans are the original people and chosen by God.) Angela Spence Nelson (in Spencer (ed.), 1991) cites James Cone's assertion that black music is naturally theological, linking rap to a tradition of spirituals and the blues²⁸. She describes Public Enemy as having what Cornel West would call 'combative spirituality'. In understanding rap, it's important to accept that under certain conditions violence, and certainly violent language, may be a positive affirmation²⁹. For the purposes of my thesis, it's important to understand that although rap is linked to violence and street culture, this doesn't exclude the theological background it draws on or its ritual character. Although they are 'profane' practices, African-American rap and signifyin are also ritual. They generate and iterate a sense of identity in an emotional realm drawing on religious community tradition and repeating dominant social values – albeit in an ironic manner.

In the Turner influenced Schechner and Appel collection *By Means of Performance*, Phillip B. Zarrilli argues that the South Asian dance form kathakali is ritual because it draws on a religious tradition of meditation techniques, while James L. Peacock argues that there is a fundamental distinction to be made between the sacred performance of an American Blue Ridge Mountains sermon and the profane performance of low-class transvestite plays in Indonesia. The influences made apparent in Spencer's collection, whether they are from Christianity or Islam, are of ideology or style. Of themselves, I would not accept these as characterising African-American street speech practices as ritual. As Gilbert Lewis remarks,

If people want to say something, why do they not just say it?
If people do ritual it is because ritual can also do something
different from saying it or something more than just that.

Lewis, 1980, p.118.

What is clear in ritual isn't its meaning but how to do it. It's a corporeal more than a verbal, an emotional not a rational practice. Peacock's work suggests that it is the way form relates to meaning that differentiates sacred Blue Mountain sermons from profane Indonesian transvestite performance. Smitherman and

²⁸ Respectively, sacred and secular music which expresses an incorporated knowledge of racism.

²⁹ Although perhaps it's more important to understand that the affirmative powers of violence are limited.

Davis show how the form of “street raps” is closely linked to that of “church raps”. It is this (together with other characteristics such as being placed in a tradition both sacred and secular) which allows a reading of street speech practices and rap music in the States as ritual.

2.9 Black British performance which is not ritual

Using a mixture of North American and British scholarship, I will develop an account of the specific character of black British performance, arguing that religious tradition is not an influence for the performance material I work with in the way that it is for signifyin and African-American rap music. Three chapters from the collection edited by Catherine Ugwu *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance* offer the opportunity to compare the African-American to the black British performance situation.

Like Smitherman, bell hooks sees the church as central in African-American culture. She describes the church, alongside school and the living room, as a taken-for-granted venue for performance (in Ugwu (ed.), 1995). In contrast, Paul Gilroy locates performance within politics:

The interface between black cultural practice and black political aspirations has been a curious and wonderfully durable modern phenomena.

Gilroy, in Ugwu (ed.), 1995, p.12.

He says “black performance culture ... is a profane practice” (p.15), although he is using the word profane less as the opposite of sacred, and rather – in conjunction with the quality of “promiscuity” – to suggest the provocative and creative way in which black performance may refuse to be socially ‘nice’ and polite.

Ugwu refers to religious influences once, in relation to the use of testimony in performance:

Informed, particularly in America, by the vocabulary and form of the black religious experience it accurately captures and conveys through performance the historic relationship between cultural activity and sacred practice.

in Ugwu (ed.), 1995, p.61.

She refers to a number of North American artists who have performed work using the form and style of testimony. This must certainly have influenced black British performance, since many of them have shown their work at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (London) among other British venues, but I suggest that British performance is characterised by a similar but secular form and style: that of narrative. (Where testimony is a statement of being, made in a religious context, narrative is a story in a secular context in the telling of which the teller positions h/erself – see my account in § 1.5 on interviews, above.) Particularly appropriate for lesbian and gay studies (see Plummer, 1995), narrative seems a more apt critical tool than testimony through which to understand the representation of selfhood in e.g. SuAndi's *The Story of M*, which Ugwu discusses (p.68), or performance artist Dorothea Smartt's and photographer Sherlee Mitchell's slide/poetry performance *From You to Me to You*³⁰.

Following the deaths of Smartt's father and Mitchell's mother, this performance explores the twin themes of the lives of two people from the generation who emigrated to Britain in the '50s and '60s and emotions of bereavement, through a narrative moving from childhood to adulthood. This double-themed narrative is pivoted on the individual as daughter: in relation to a parent, personified in Smartt and her relationship to her father but also expressed in Mitchell's loving, grieving photographs. Clearly, religious or ritual referents would be appropriate to this piece about death, funeral arrangements, *in memoria*. Smartt and Mitchell initiate the performance by coming on stage together to light a semi-circle or circle of candles. However, it is striking that the form chosen for the verbal part of the performance is not testimony but narrative. The domestic/secular atmosphere which brings home a sense of family, parents, the enormous yet domestic emotion of grief at losing an elderly parent, is reinforced by Smartt's reading her poems while sitting in a wicker chair rather than standing to declaim from a bookstand (symbolising a pulpit). Her tone of voice is gentle; sometimes vibrating with strong emotion, but introspective rather

³⁰ First presented 1.11.1994, as part of *Way To Go: A Users' Guide to Death and Dying*, ICA, London.

than declamatory. This performance is situated in a secular, in preference to a religious, realm.

I have agreed above with arguments that show rap to be a ritual form of performance. However, where British poets – white or black, are performing rap, I would argue that they do so in reference to North American culture, i.e. to a secular tradition of international borrowings (the black Atlantic). They aren't situated in relation to the religious tradition of rap in the same way as African-American artists who grew up in a church culture of testimony. A performer such as Patience Agbabi, whose performance poem *The Black The White and The Blue* I will look at in Chapter Four, is situated in that exhilarating “interface between black cultural practice and black political aspirations” (but also white cultural practice³¹) which Gilroy uncovers. In one of her poems, she remarks:

Black culture goes deeper
than x and Nike
from 'R.A.W.' in Agbabi, 1995.

Nigerian-British herself, she does use rap in poems like *RAPunzel*, *Rappin It Up* or *R.A.W.*. *Rappin It Up* also makes (ironic) reference to a lyrical line from Wordsworth³², and to ska³³; *R.A.W.* refers to “jelly rock n' roll”³⁴ and punk³⁵.

³¹ As Gilroy and Mercer would argue, there is no hard and fast division between black and white cultural practices and to try to carve one only replicates racist political strategies (Gilroy, 1990, Mercer 1994, p.15). Access to black culture may be through unexpected channels. On the face of it, Agbabi's cultural roots appear to come from all the right places: Wordsworth and Chaucer from an Oxford University education, rap and ska from the black music scene in London, although I suspect we would uncover anomalies if we dug further down. The poet Jackie Kay describes a more complex situation:

On my bedroom wall is a big poster
of Angela Davis who is in prison
right now for nothing at all
except she wouldn't put up with stuff.
My mum says she is *only* 26
which seems really old to me

...
[My dad] brought me a badge home which I wore
to school. It says FREE ANGELA DAVIS.
And all my pals say 'Who's she?'

From *The Adoption Papers*, Kay, 1991.

We can read this narrative as a politicisation of the black child by her parents, situating her in her heritage of black cultural pride – but we know from the rest of the story that her parents are white adoptive parents.

³² White eighteenth century English poet.

³³ Caribbean music genre preceding reggae.

Agbabi utilised user-friendly, newly accessible computer technology in *The Black The White and The Blue*, to reproduce the lettering of racist graffiti and newspaper typefaces: making words perform on the page. These are secular referents, drenched in political meaning. The subject-matter of her poetry is polemical rather than representational, seeking social change rather than the sharing of emotional experience which generates sociality (Gluckman). *Sentences* is about domestic violence; *Cain* – cocaine, street culture and race politics; even the children’s poem *RAPunzel* laughingly describes a girl in a tower block ashamed of her “short and frizzy” hair:

I need a twenty metre hair extension
 thought I’d mention ain’t no pretension
 wholesale retail strong enough to abseil
 gals get plaitin RAPunzel’s rappin
 from *RAPunzel* in Agbabi, 1995.

who eventually throws “this vanity” (and the man!) out of the window.

RAPunzel brings African-Caribbean people together in a ritual manner through the affirmation of nappy hair against hair products such as extensions (both of which are in fact part of African-Caribbean culture in Britain). However, when the central character drops the man she finds boring out of the window with her extensions and sets up home with Auntie instead, the sexism of the heterosexual matrix and the white nuclear family are being questioned in a way which will make us *think*, rather than *feel* at one with a community. Gilroy has argued that this is a critical necessity for black British art:

A corresponding tide of anti-intellectualism has meant that some spokespeople inside the black communities have accepted the trap which racism lays and begun to celebrate an idea of themselves as people who are happy to feel rather than think.

Gilroy, 1988 (reprinted in Gilroy, 1993b), p.102.

Here Gilroy urges us to refuse the terms of the Cartesian binary which allows us to exercise only the ontological/being/feeling side in (a feminist category of) experience and which bars us from working our incorporated knowledge through

³⁴ References black American musician Jelly Roll Morton’s important role in the development of white-dominated music genre rock & roll.

³⁵ An anarchist white music culture which appropriated black musical style and took on anti-racist and anti-nationalist politics (see Gilroy, 1987).

interpretation. In order to do this in performance those who are defined black and gay must refuse an unthinking participation in ritual form, as can be seen in this account of Bakhtin's concept of carnival and why I came to feel it would not be appropriate to my participants' work.

Robson pursues his analysis of Millwall FC fandom *against* Bakhtin's concept of 'carnival':

To experience a Millwall crowd in full, belligerent and vituperative flight is to hear a sometimes disconcerting echo of the historical bitternesses characteristic of these cultural transformations. It is vital, impassioned and at times viscerally moving, but it is hardly colourful in the currently popular sense. Carefree Latins banging drums - or indeed, kilted Scotsmen blowing bagpipes - it is not.

Robson, 1998, Footnote 114, p.214.

This, on the whole, is not the romanticised carnival of literary theory and cultural studies, overturning prevailing social classifications with playful zest. There is not the merest hint of any utopian impulse.... The impulse is, ultimately, towards the confirmation of boundaries as opposed to their dissolution,

Robson, 1998, p.215 (Robson's italics).

Bakhtin's concept of carnival has obvious resonances for my participants, whose work draws heavily on the somatic and on symbols which could be characterised as 'grotesque': menstrual blood, giant penises (i.e. the mythical 'big dick' of black men, see especially Chapter Seven). However Robson raises an important query as to whether carnival is a romantic, playful overturning of social classification, or works to confirm social boundaries. Stallybrass and White settle the query in this way:

It actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression (White 1982:60). The most that can be said in the abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*.

Stallybrass and White, 1986, p. 14 (authors' italics).

They define the 'carnavalesque' as follows:

The 'carnavalesque' mediates between a classical/classificatory body and its negations, its Others, what it excludes to create its

identity as such. In this process discourses about the body have a privileged role, for transcodings between different levels and sectors of social and psychic reality are effected through the intensifying grid of the body. It is no accident, then, that transgressions and the attempt to control them obsessively return to somatic symbols, for these are ultimate elements of social classification itself.

Stallybrass and White, 1986, p.26.

They also criticise 'carnival' for:

its nostalgia; its uncritical populism (carnival often violently abuses and demonizes *weaker*, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who 'don't belong' – in a process of *displaced abjection*); its failure to do away with the official dominant culture, its licensed complicity.

Stallybrass and White, 1986, p.19 (authors' italics).

The performances with which I work are inherently radical. While they have many characteristics of ritual: generating a sense of social cohesion through a togetherness based on affinity³⁶, drawing us into the emotional realm, they do not iterate social values in order to re-affirm them. The performances I work with draw on grotesque imagery and somatic symbols in the zestful spirit Bakhtin revealed – which Robson rather cynically refers to. However, they go back to the roots of sociality in order to overturn social classifications rather than to confirm boundaries as carnival does.

These performances are not engaged in the iteration, reaffirmation and generation of social norms – nor of new social values. It isn't possible to reaffirm and generate as a social norm a *new* social value. As Butler following Foucault points out, there is no place before, outside or beyond power from which we could generate some new beneficent political project (Butler, 1990, p.30). We can't step outside the heterosexual matrix to play with gender as performance or generate a wholly new benign discourse of race. As Robson argues, one individual discursively representing social or moral forms and the identities within them, can't inspire the spontaneous collective belonging which comes from the heart of the crowd. S/he may trigger it – but only through articulating the discourse, the norms and social values, in which social cohesion iterates and

³⁶ Chela Sandoval's concept, cited in Haraway, 1985, reprinted in Haraway, 1991.

generates itself. What one individual can do, is to articulate this discourse, to occupy these positions with irony, to 'queer' them.

This ironic parody of dominant values is utilised in both ritual forms of performance like signifyin, as Gates argues, and in my participants' work (I will talk about this in detail in my analysis of Patience Agbabi's performed poem). However, the reiteration of social values as ironic parody doesn't necessarily deconstruct the processes of identity being generated. Signifyin, like the ritual duelling play of young men on South London housing estates, generates black and white as separate identities, although it does so in the positive spirit of combatting prejudice rather than in a negative racism. My participants *question* the whole basis to these discursive formations of identity. They step outside the ritual realm; they articulate the same discourse but in the spirit of thought, question and deconstruction, rather than that of feeling and the generation of social collectivity.

2.10 Conclusion

The field of performativity in which I am working came into being in the wake of Butler's work on gender as performative. However, it goes back before Butler to recover various theories about performance and identity in the social sciences. It also draws directly on Butler's source, the linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin. Taking into account Butler's resistance to misunderstanding of gender as performance, the field is developing a sophisticated concept of performance as it incorporates work from cultural studies (including critical thinking on Bakhtin's theories of carnival) and various understandings of the political character of performance. It draws on ideas about ritual which can be traced back into social and cultural anthropology. This enables it to incorporate an understanding of the body and emotions together with an understanding of politics (rather than lose touch with matters of the body as pure Foucauldian thought tends to do). Clarifying what ritual means in classic anthropological accounts enables us to understand better the character of performance and the way in which identity like gender is initiated through social processes like ritual.

The performances I work with are situated in a political tradition rather than the religious tradition which lies behind much African-American performance. They utilise what Peggy Phelan sees as an inherently political space to explore the dynamics of processes of identification. In ritual, these same dynamics are explored in a way which often repudiates the black and the queer. My participants therefore turn from a realm in which identity must be generated without being questioned to one in which incorporated knowledge of the politics as well as the processes of identity can be unpacked and replayed.

My next chapter offers fragments of a his/herstorical account of the black and the gay in Britain. Understanding that identity is produced through ritual in a dynamic which often relies on the violent repudiation of particular categories of being is critical in the analysis of political and social dynamics which I will uncover in British history.

Chapter Three Background His/Herstory

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.... In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.... Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

Walter Benjamin, 1955, p.247 (Benjamin's italics).

Before I begin my analysis of questions of identification represented in black and gay performance, I want to contextualise the processes of identification in question. Traditional ethnographic fieldwork studies are sometimes described as 'snapshots' of the community in time. While offering a certain 'still' quality which can be useful for the purposes of analysis, this style is open to critique for failing to provide temporal depth.

My analyses of performances are done from the perspectives of black and gay people; from within looking both inwards and out. There is a danger that I will give the impression of a self-contained identity which cheerfully goes about the task of constituting itself with pride. I want to convey a sense of the context in which that work takes place; the shaming, tortuous and denigratory practices against which those who are identified black and gay assert pride. In this chapter I look at how being black and gay is constituted and manipulated in a world weighted in favour of whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, the "able" body and middle class values. Part of what I offer is a recovery of fragments of his/herstory for black and gay people e.g. tracing ways in which racism and lesbophobia reinforced each other in seventeenth and eighteenth century English literature. I continue the argument I made in my accounts of ritual, showing how black and queer, and the black lesbian in particular, were articulated as symbolic outsider-figures (as Smith, 1994, argues) in political discourse. Here I will look at media representations of two black gay figures in the public eye during the 1980s

and 1990s: Linda Bellos and Justin Fashanu. I also trace a developing black and gay awareness which foregrounds the performance work I analyse. I follow Mercer's argument that this awareness came in the wake of a feminist revising of monolithic black politics in the 1970s.

Mary Douglas has written about the immense symbolic power of the ambiguous (Douglas, 1966), which may be regarded either as polluting – as in the cloven-hoofed but not cud-chewing pig in Jewish culture, or sacred – as in the scaly but warm-blooded pangolin in Lele culture. Those who are defined queer are ambiguous. We don't fit the rules of a binary sex/gender economy; our desire refuses to comply with the regulations of hetero-normativity. In Britain we are therefore feared as polluting and dangerous, while in some Native American cultures we were celebrated as mediators (see e.g. Carocci). In her paper "Self-evidence" Douglas suggests that attitudes to ambiguity reflect social values. Thus, the celebration of the ambiguous pangolin in Lele culture reflects the Lele exogamous marriage system and their optimistic attitude that outsiders to the community will be well-disposed. Further study making cross-cultural comparison on these lines would show whether different attitudes to the ambiguity of homosexuality reflect different social structures. In this chapter I will theorise the ways in which the symbolic power of the ambiguous 'other' is utilised in British social structures. Following Anna Marie Smith I will use Derrida's concept of supplementarity to do so. (I use Derrida in a provisional and partial manner only, as my main concern in this thesis has been to develop the postmodern feminist thinking of queer theory so that it may help to uncover the dynamics exposed in black queer performance through integrating appropriate aspects of those fields of thought with thinking that incorporates the body. A Derridean analysis of this material could be fruitfully developed in line with a more powerful use of semiotics.)

3.1 White lesbian and gay sources (his/her historical material prior to 1970s)

Emma Donoghue's lively account of seventeenth and eighteenth century British lesbian culture provides a wealth of material about attitudes to race and sexuality. It doesn't surprise me that in spite of conscientious archive research, Donoghue doesn't uncover a single subjective account of British black lesbian experience. What she does show is that in medical treatises, anti-masturbation manuals, cases brought to the law courts, popular ballads, erotica and travel writing during this period there was a persistent tendency to ascribe lesbianism to 'other' nations¹.

Drawing on Ovid's epistles, numerous poets (including Pope) and prose writers saw the Greek poet Sappho as the 'inventor' as well as symbol of lesbian practices. More generally, medical texts such as Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book* (1671), which saw lesbianism as a hermaphrodites' practice, claim there are many hermaphrodites in Asia and Africa, but "I never heard of but one in this country" (cited Donoghue, 1993, p.35. See also George Arnauld's *A Dissertation on Hermaphrodites* (London publication date 1750) and Dr. James Parsons's *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry into the Nature of Hermaphrodites* (1741), both cited in Donoghue, 1993). During the libel case brought by Scottish school-teachers Miss Wood and Miss Pirie in 1810², one of the judges – Lord Meadowbank, insisted that no woman in the United Kingdom would have a big

¹ "Ex Africa semper aliquid novi", as Pliny the Elder remarked. ("Out of Africa always something novel", Pliny the Elder, A.D.77). The tendency to think of 'other' peoples as peculiarly different is long-established. Pliny was drawing on an even more ancient Greek saying.

² Miss Marianne Woods and Miss Jane Pirie sued Dame Helen Cumming Gordon for libel in 1811. Dame Gordon's grand-daughter had been placed at their school and had complained that she had been kept awake by strange goings on in the night between the two teachers. (She was sharing a bed with Miss Pirie, as she was the oldest girl in the school, in a dormitory with several other girls who also slept two to a bed – as was usual in a nineteenth century school.) Dame Gordon had passed this information to the parents of the other school-girls, who had all been removed. Miss Woods and Miss Pirie were suing for defamation of character and the right to claim for the loss of their life savings and livelihoods. Dame Gordon's grand-daughter, Miss Cumming, was sixteen at the time, the illegitimate but only child of Dame Gordon's deceased son and an Indian woman. Her race and illegitimacy undoubtedly affected the outcome of the case, which was decided in the two teachers' favour, as Faderman argues: "The judges suggested that Miss Cumming, having been raised in the lascivious East, had no idea of the horror such an accusation would stir in Britain," (Faderman, 1981, p.148.). For a full account of the case, see Faderman, 1981, pp.147-154.

enough clitoris to practise the penetrative tribadism he had heard was common in India.

In 1684, the French baron J.B. Tavernier's *Collections of Travels Through Turkey into Persia and the East-Indies* was translated into English, including this mention of Turkish Seraglios and:

the Fabulous Story, which is related of their [the women] being served up with Cucumbers cut into pieces, and not entire, out of a ridiculous fear least they should put them to indecent uses ... But it is not only in the Seraglio, that that abominable Vice reigns, but it is predominant also in the City *Constantinople*, and in all the Provinces of the Empire, and the wicked Example of the Men, who, slighting the natural use of Woman-Kind, are mutually inflam'd with a detestable love for one another, unfortunately enclines the Women to imitate them.

Tavernier 1684, cited in Donoghue, 1993, p.256.

Moving onto accounts of women passing as men in order to marry, which was the subject of many popular anecdotes (reinstating lesbianism within heteronormativity), Donoghue cites accounts of Spanish and Irish women and suggests that the most popular anecdote of this kind was drawn from A.G. Busbequis's sixteenth century *Travels into Turkey*, translated in 1744. She notes that Egypt was a particularly popular location for stories about hermaphrodites and comments:

the British were not alone in using Egypt as a handy dumping ground for rumours about lesbianism; it seems that the West always liked to displace its anxieties to the east. And of course, this displacement gave fresh fuel to pseudo-scientific theses about the inferiority and animality of women of colour; racism and hatred of lesbians endlessly reinforced each other.

Donoghue, 1993, pp.36-7.

Donoghue also discusses the eighteenth century satirical text, William King's *The Toast*, which satirises members of the Irish aristocracy: the Duchess of Newburgh and someone thought to be Lady Allen. The character thought to be Lady Allen is described with xenophobic slurs: "a little Dutch Frow", "a Jewess and a Dwarf", with "the Locks of a Negress half-mingled with Grey,/And a

Carcase ill-moulded of dirty red Clay"³. Donoghue argues that King combines his fear of lesbians with his fear of "what he sees as foreign, inferior elements in Anglo-Irish society" (Donoghue, 1993, p.241). (It is significant that he feels able to do so while satirising Irish rather than white English society.)⁴

Rowse's *Homosexuals in History: A Study of Ambivalence in Society, Literature and the Arts* (1977) is an account marked by racism and an inappropriately lascivious tone:

Three years in Algeria opened his eyes – Algeria was a Mecca for all this circle: no Protestant obfuscations there. Gide fell for a voluptuous native boy, Athman, who must have been very satisfying, in contrast to Madeleine, and got his fellow-traveller, Henri Ghéon ... to bring this morsel of humanity back to Paris.

Rowse, 1977, p.186.

The inappropriate usage of Mecca – holy city of pilgrimage for the Islamic faithful – as a metaphor for a place of sexual freedom from up-tight Protestant Christianity, is followed by a set of derogatory, feminising, exoticising and infantilising descriptions of Gide's lover, Athman: "a voluptuous native boy", "this morsel of humanity". Arabia, Algeria, India figure solely as places to travel through, or as the sites of colonial or military campaigns, or as romping grounds for liberatory exotic sex. There is no mention of any British black gay culture.

Only an examination of Gide's original writings could show whether Rowse's prejudice was shared by nineteenth century white French gay men. *Homosexuals in History* does, however, reveal the objectification and exoticisation of black gay men in 1970s Britain which continues to be prevalent today.

³ This poem bears an interesting resemblance to African-American 'toasts', which also often use homophobic abuse.

⁴ The widespread desire to ascribe lesbian practices to 'other' nations in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is perhaps echoed in contemporary black British communities, where it is often argued that lesbian and gay lives are 'a white man's disease'. "I have been affected at times by people of African, African-Caribbean and Asian descent stating that homosexuality, lesbianism and feminism are 'white diseases'," (Mason-John, 1999, p.3.) This might be simply the result of a common desire to project the unpalatable onto any 'other' available, or related in a more complex way as a black reaction to having excessive sexuality projected wholesale onto the entire community.

Because of combinations of racism and homophobia, if there had been any collective events which were exclusively black and gay prior to the 1970s, they were unlikely to have been documented. Those who wrote about lesbians and gay men in the black communities had to be guarded. As late as 1988, Dorothea Smartt warned that writers she described in her chapter on black lesbian literature might not be lesbian. This may have been to protect women who while writing for a knowing lesbian audience were not 'out' to family or community. It may also have been in recognition of the fluidity of sexuality⁵. White writers in lesbian and gay studies would usually say they didn't know anyone black who could point them in the direction of information and simply mark the absence of black lesbian and gay experience from their narratives. Kobena Mercer argues that autonomous organising of black women's and black gay and lesbian movements follows 1970s feminist movement (see next section). In Val Wilmer's autobiography *Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This: My Life in the Jazz World* there is no reference to any separate black lesbian community or organisation.

Wilmer was working (as a writer and photographer) in jazz circles, and so she is unusual in that she was socialising during the 1950s and 1960s with African-American and black British people. She describes her first lesbian encounter in 1964 with someone she calls Yvonne – a nurse over from the Bahamas for a short stay, whom she met at a party. Wilmer also describes a more serious relationship with a woman she calls Stevie Tagoe: a dancer and musician. (Stevie's paternal grandfather was one of Ghana's first jazz musicians, her maternal grandmother was a white East Ender and her maternal grandfather a sailor from Barbados. It's worth noting that Wilmer is unable to give us Stevie Tagoe's real name.)

The relationship with Stevie lasts several years but neither young woman is able to take the relationship seriously in the social climate of the times. Wilmer

⁵ As part of my critical approach in my chapter on black lesbian literature, I had to point out that "When someone has written a sensuous poem about making love with her female lover, and has subsequently moved into a relationship with a man, that doesn't make the poem straight." (In Mason-John (ed.), 1995, p. 153).

doesn't say so, but this appears to be because of the threat of homophobia and the invisibility of lesbian lives rather than racism, although she does give examples of the problems 'mixed race' (heterosexual) couples experienced.

Both women had affairs, sometimes with men, which it seems they found difficult but couldn't address as a threat to a relationship they weren't allowed to treat as a marriage. They almost always travelled together, even when Stevie went to Turkey and Ghana or Wilmer to the States. Wilmer describes this in terms of them both liking to travel the world rather than because of a commitment to each other.

Wilmer describes the two women's search for somewhere to socialise and dance freely together and their finding the famous lesbian club, Gateways:

From time to time a few other Black women appeared, a couple of whom had the same complexion as Stevie and, I assumed from their East London accents, similar backgrounds. I noticed them eyeing her with suspicion, however, and when we did try to strike up a conversation, they made it quite clear that this was their patch and anyone in their company not for sharing.

Wilmer, 1989, p.164.

Gloria Anzaldúa notes that "Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.58). She suggests that if we have been taught a low estimation of who we are, we will be afraid to look into a similar face. "*Pena. Shame.*" (*ibid.*) Wilmer's account suggests that an internalised homophobia/racism also operated in 1960s Britain against black lesbian community feeling.

In 1969, Wilmer went with Stevie to Turkey. (Her account is very different to Rowse's account of Algeria.)

One of the first words we learned was *seviçi*. Farah [the mother of a dancer with whom Stevie performed] had guessed our relationship and we soon realised this translated as 'lesbian'. She loved to share gossip and scandal and would tell us, nudge-nudge, that this one or that one was *seviçi*, having us constantly in stitches.

Wilmer, 1989, p.195.

While Wilmer links lesbian lives with the world of sexual scandal, this is a reflection of the attitude of a middle aged Turkish woman in the 1960s. Wilmer's account suggests an openness about lesbian life-styles in Turkey at this time

which is in contrast to the invisibility of lesbians in Britain. Although lesbian relationships were scandalous, they were talked about.

In 1970, Stevie went back to her father's country of origin, Ghana, and Wilmer accompanied her. Although this trip is described in detail nothing is said about attitudes to lesbian women or the two women's relationship.

3.2 1970s to 1980s – Feminism and plurality / New Right hegemony

Kobena Mercer suggests that “[d]uring the 1970s feminist initiatives radically politicized the issue of sexual representation.” (Mercer, 1994, p.133.) Desire and sexual politics were brought into black political discourse by black feminists (*ibid.*, p.139). Feminist initiatives also highlighted masculinity for consideration from what we might call the queer and the black perspectives, as in two studies which Mercer compares: *The Sexuality of Men* (Humphries and Metcalfe, 1985) and *Black Masculinity* (Staples, 1982). The feminist struggle revised black politics as a project of pluralities rather than a project for black heterosexual men:

The impact of black women's voices in the early eighties heralded the pluralization of black identities that would become a key theme throughout the decade.

ibid., p.11.

Black gay men could stand alongside black women in this feminist agenda⁶, to demand a black politics which should include them.

Mercer draws our attention to the way in which,

the radicalization of sexual politics from 1970 onwards derived significant momentum from imaginary equivalences with black struggles, as “black pride” and “brotherhood” acted as metonymic leverage for the affirmation of “gay pride” and the assertion that “sisterhood is strength”.

Mercer, 1994, p.277.

He shows how the black politics of the 1950s and 1960s was exposed as monolithic in its masculinist presumptions by the feminism of the 1970s. This

⁶ Mercer speaks of black gay men and black women, obviously this latter group includes lesbian women but I think this nomenclature does also reflect both gender division in black gay organisation and socialising and a strong lesbian presence in black women's organisations.

heartened a gay (and lesbian) political movement, so that in the 1980s black feminist and black gay organisations were seeking to raise awareness of a plurality of identities within the black communities. Women would no longer accept that their only position in the black movement was “prone” (Stokely Carmichael). In Britain, there was an upsurge in grass-roots organisation by black feminists, in which was a strong, although often hidden, lesbian presence (see below). My chronology (see Appendix I), shows groups, conferences and collectives initiated throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. In 1980 the Gay Black Group was established. In 1982, the first Black Lesbian Group was set up. (It folded later that year but the impulse towards a black lesbian movement separate from a black women’s movement is important.) Of the Gay Black Group, Mercer writes:

coming to voice involved participation in the discursive construction of a new, hybrid form of “imagined community” in an in-between space that drew on elements from different origins and sources.

Mercer, 1994, p.13.

Mercer sees these groups as distinctive political initiatives because, following black feminism, they assert difference within difference; operating not in the spaces of black or white but somewhere in between. Anzaldúa calls this *Borderlands/La Frontera*, comparing the situation of lesbian women and gay men to Chicano/a peoples who define certain communities by standing between them (Anzaldúa, 1987).

During the 1980s in particular, there was an upsurge in black lesbian organisation (see groups and newsletters listed in my chronology, Appendix I). In addition, black women’s events of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s were a haven for and dominated by a hidden black lesbian presence (see Mason-John (ed.), 1995). The club night *Sauda*, for example, advertised itself as a ‘black women only’ night. This was generally, although certainly not exclusively, understood to refer to lesbian and bisexual women. The nuances of this understanding include the greater need of some black lesbian and bisexual women to be closeted – not because of greater homophobia in black communities but because the risk of losing family support in ‘coming out’ includes

the risk of losing access to one's black community and culture in a racist society. There was also sometimes an understanding that women needed to come to terms with a lesbian sexuality, and might go through a period of defining as heterosexual while going to lesbian-dominated events before 'coming out'⁷. Possibly there is more tolerance of blurring between the labelled sexualities in black lesbian circles than in white lesbian circles because cultural expectations of family structure are not so rigidly nuclear. In Caribbean cultures women are often raising children in so-called 'matriarchal' family structures, outside the long-term monogamous heterosexual relationship which is the hegemonic norm in white British cultures. Rosamund Elwin's *Tongues on Fire* cites several cases of women in the Caribbean who brought up children together in what her contributors think are taken for 'matriarchal' families but may have been lesbian relationships. (Elwin's collection is dominated by North American contributors, I'm using it solely to inform the British experience.) I don't mean to suggest that Caribbean culture is any less or more homophobic than white English cultures. Nor are the black British lesbian and gay communities any more tolerant of, say, bisexuality than white communities. Attitudes to sexuality are differently modulated in different cultures; spaces in which a sexuality we might call lesbian, gay or bisexual can find temporary expression are different rather than more or less.

The question of a hidden black lesbian presence in black women's events is revealed in all its knotty complexity in the collapse of OWAAD – the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent. Valerie Mason-John states: "Black lesbians, although they were most definitely at the forefront of the organization, found themselves to be invisible." (Mason-John, 1995, p.7). She offers the following account of the collapse: in 1981, some black lesbian women attempted to assert visibility in OWAAD partly through organising a workshop on lesbian sexuality. Some black heterosexual women responded with hostility and abuse and some of the black lesbian women present with shame, fear and

⁷ 'Coming out of the closet', i.e. becoming open about your lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer identity, is understood to first pass through a stage of 'coming out' to yourself.

silence. The following year, in spite of attempts to re-group, OWAAD collapsed (see Mason-John, 1995, pp.7-8). However, Avtar Brah (Brah, 1992), suggests there were many factors and cites “the suppression of lesbian sexualities” as only one of the issues which OWAAD recognised but couldn’t decide how to prioritise. There is no suggestion in her account of outright homophobia in OWAAD. (Bellos’s account (in Mason-John (ed.), 1995) is inclined to agree with Mason-John’s.)

Mercer argues that “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis” (Mercer, 1994, p.259), the struggle over identity during the 1970s and 1980s was one which desperately sought to assert something “fixed, coherent and stable” (*ibid.*), precisely because of a growing realisation that this was not possible.

[O]n the contrary, within and between the various new movements that have arisen in postwar, Western, capitalist democracies, what is asserted is an emphasis on “difference”.

ibid., p.260.

Newly enfranchised political subjects – women, black people, lesbian and gay people, youth – were asserting not identity but difference in the face of monolithic constructions of I-dentity⁸. In Britain we did so in the context of a crisis of left-wing politics which ceased to be able to respond in our interests. Mercer argues that the New Right of Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher captured the field of the symbolic:

The life of nations, no less than that of men, is lived largely in the imagination.

Powell, 1969, cited in Mercer, 1994, p.257.

Anna Marie Smith’s *New Right Discourse* pursues this argument in more detail. She shows how the New Right developed certain political strategies which they used against both black and gay communities. Powell’s discourse on race from the ‘60s and ‘70s was developed in the 1980s in a repudiation of homosexuality. As in the 1970s race was a ‘lens’ through which social crisis was perceived and the means by which it was to be resolved: “send it away” (Hall, 1978), so for Smith the 1980s were marked by a fixation on sexuality. This

⁸ I use ‘I-dentity’ to suggest a monolithic assertion of the dominant identity, e.g. masculinity, white-ness, through processes of Othering which can be understood in psychoanalytic theory.

culminated with the institution of the infamous Section 28 of the Local Government Act, 1987-1988: *Prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or publishing material.*

Like Smith I draw on Kobena Mercer's unpublished doctoral thesis analysing Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech for an understanding of Powellism. Smith doesn't always make clear the distinction between Powell the man and popular Powellism, but gives a full account of the Powellite discourse on race. This operates several conceptual strategies.

Smith shows how in Powellism the black community are clearly constituted "outsider figures". Derrida is important in both her and my accounts:

the enclosure of a space within a set of frontiers only comes about when an opposition has been established between that space and some sort of outsider figure.

...

No text can ever openly and fully confess the extent to which its closed spaces are dependent on their oppositions with outsider figures for their constitution. Supplementary relations are always hidden; inside-outside relations are always supported by various strategies which attempt to conceal the constitutivity of otherness.

Smith, 1994, p.24.

A political "space" can be created by the expulsion of an "outsider figure" through the mechanism of "supplementary relations". Derrida's "supplementary relations" are always hidden in the same way that Bourdieu's *doxa* is mis-recognised, and Bourdieu's diagrammatic account of *doxa* can help us unpack supplementarity in the same way that it helped unpack 'gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix'. ('Gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix' is a supplementarity, as Butler acknowledges in explicitly referencing Derrida's theory in her work.)

It may be helpful here to remember Turner's use of the Jungian concepts "sign": the abbreviated expression of a known thing, and "symbol": the best possible expression of a relatively unknown thing (Turner, 1967, p.26, as cited in Chapter Two). In making the discourse of race and sexuality a symbolic discourse, the New Right rendered it a realm of the relatively unknown. Having done so, Enoch Powell or Margaret Thatcher could offer to explain that which

they had constituted as worryingly unknown, in the clear and simple terms of racism and homophobia. In addition, in calling up these symbolic figures, New Right discourse is drawing on elements of ritual. Symbolism brings with it the realm of emotions, in which identity is generated and stamped with approval or repudiated in disgust.

We can represent Derrida's concept in the terms of Bourdieu's *doxa* thus:

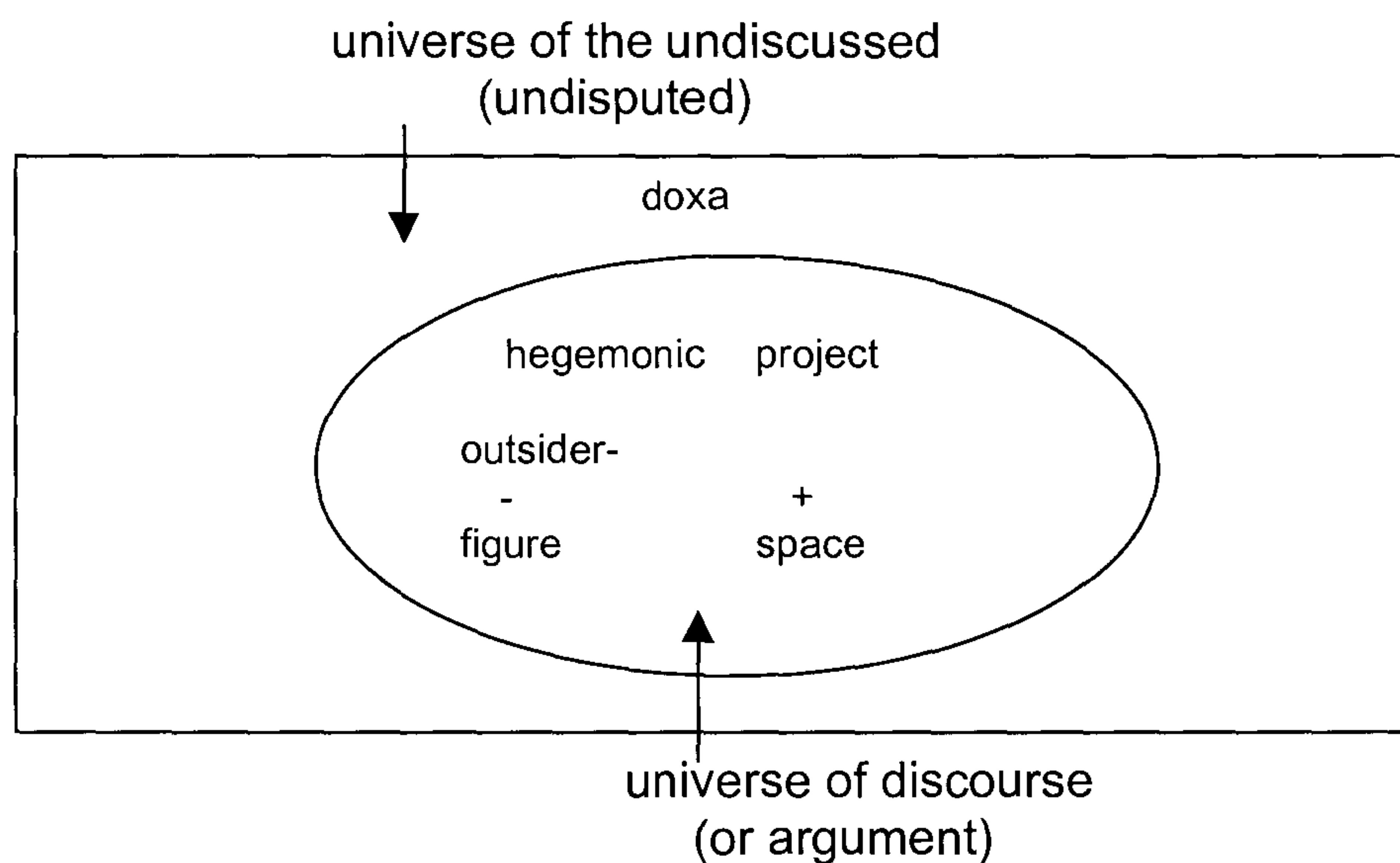


Fig. v: Derrida's concept of supplementarity, in diagrammatic form adapted from Bourdieu, 1977.

The hidden supplementary relations which are not explicitly brought out in Bourdieu's model are then revealed:

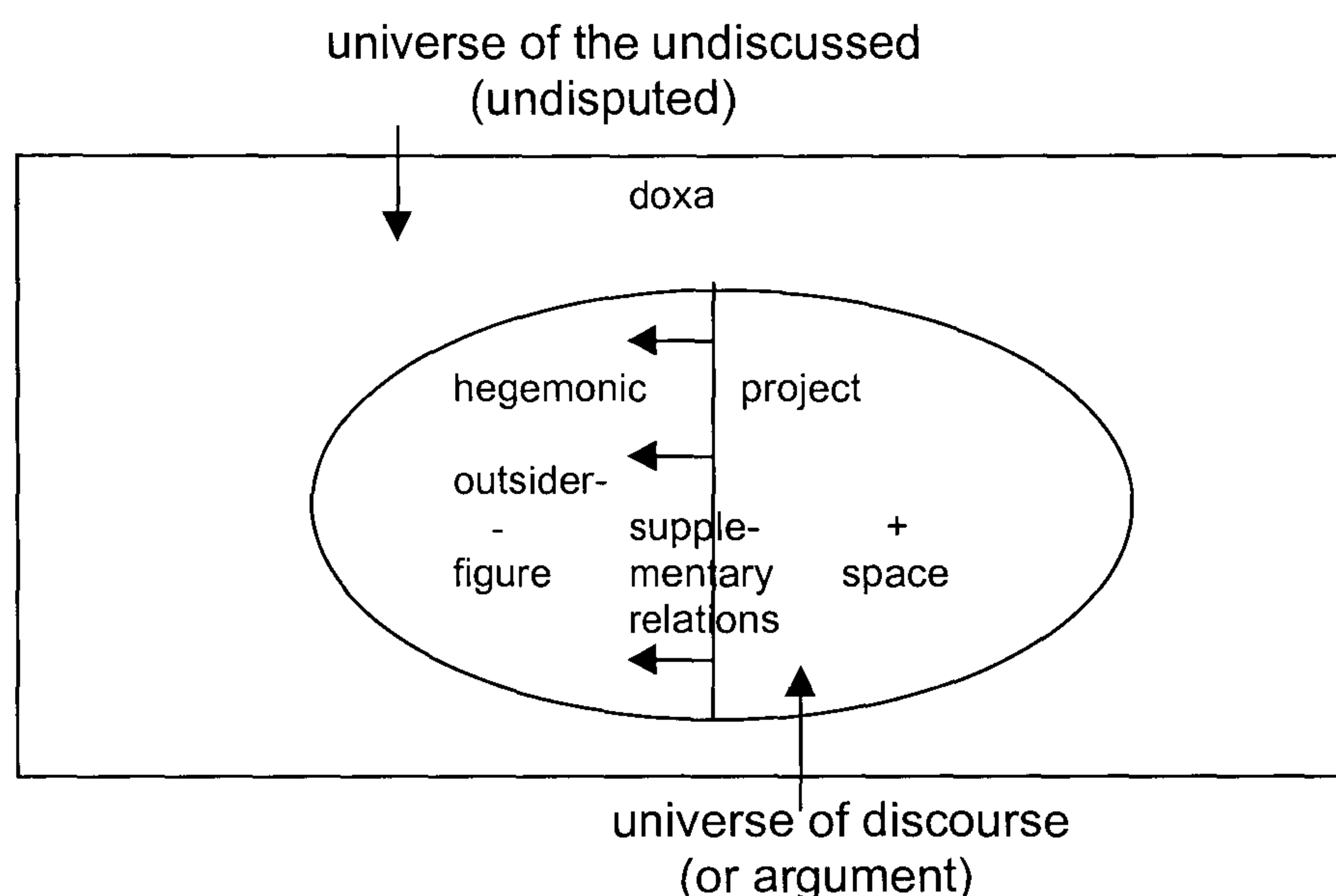


Fig. vi: Derrida's concept of supplementarity in diagrammatic form showing the supplementary relations, adapted from Bourdieu, 1977.

Working specifically in the fields of race politics/racism and sexuality/homophobia which are significant for my project participants, Smith uses Derrida's thinking to show how a field of discourse is generated through the dynamism of this relationship with a designated "outsider figure". In a key passage, Smith says:

The deployment within Thatcherite discourse of various coded and explicit representations around race and sexuality has to be understood in terms of Thatcherism's hegemonic project as a whole. The right-wing attacks on black immigrants, multiculturalism and queers played a crucial role in the legitimation of specific aspects of that project. Hall would of course agree that it is not enough to note that 'nation' and 'family' operated as two spaces which were central to the construction of the Thatcherite imaginary. We should look for the outsider figures against which these spaces were defined, for it is only against outsider figures that the boundaries of a social space are constructed. We should also look for the historical specificity of the relationship between the outsider figure and the social space.

Smith, 1994, pp.31-2.

She identifies a certain group of people and policies: black immigrants, multiculturalism and queers, as crucial in the development of a hegemonic New Right discourse. In *fig. vii*, we can see how supplementary relations repulse symbolic black and queer outsider figures, and thereby create a space for the

symbolic realms of 'nation' and 'family'⁹. This "argument" as Bourdieu would call it, hides a further "argument" between white/black, gay/straight. Once we are drawn into the "argument":

black-ness/nation

queer-ness/family

we accept white-ness and straight-ness as *a priori* and natural.

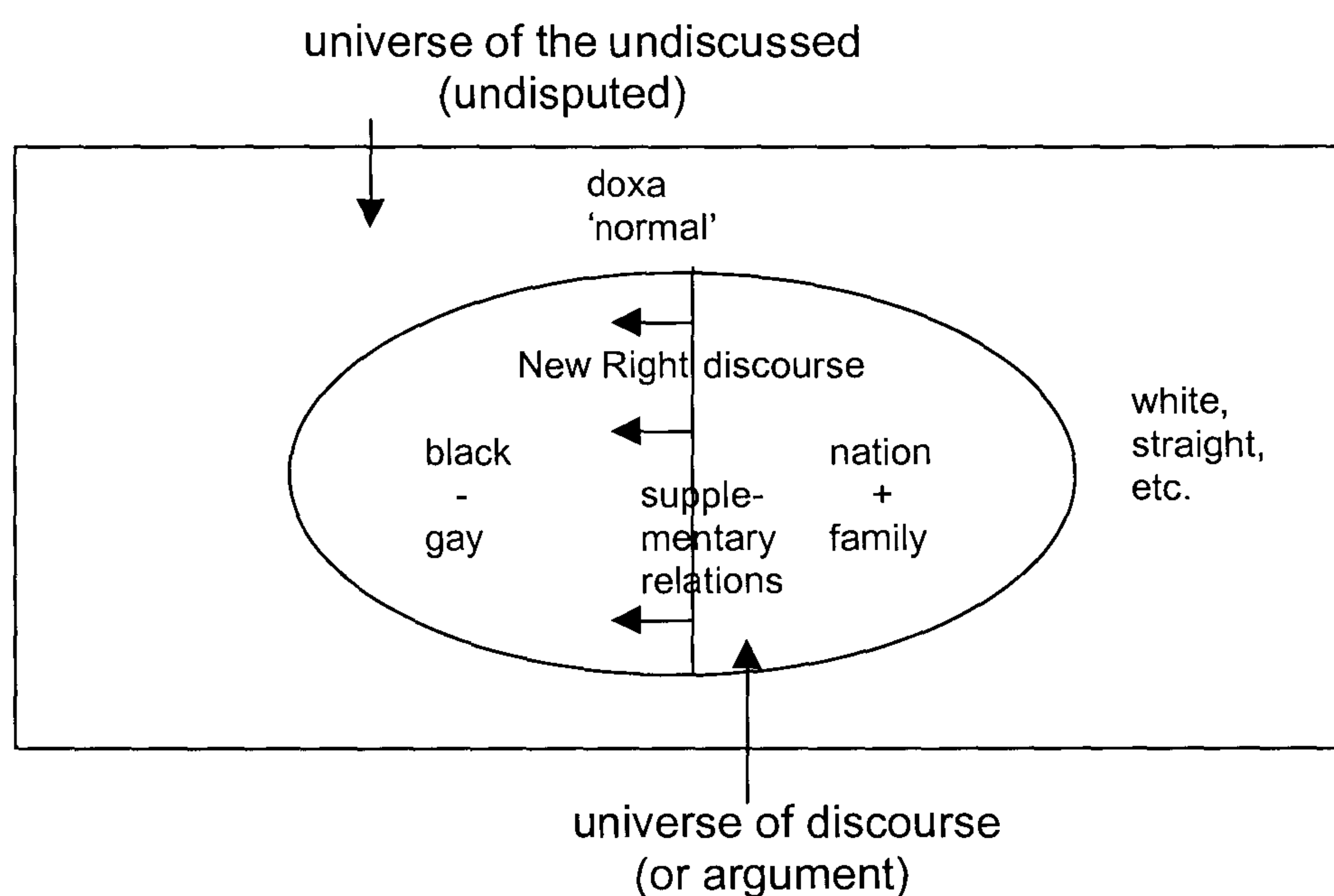


Fig. vii: Smith's account of Thatcherite Britain in diagrammatic form adapted from Bourdieu, 1977.

I argue that Powellism attempted to overpower the tradition (as Benjamin puts it) of black history and to offer us instead the narrative of Britannia threatened by a recent tide of black immigration. Thatcherism attempted to overpower the tradition of gay history as well. 'Nation' and 'family' as spaces on the one hand, and 'blacks' and 'queers' – especially the black lesbian – as outsider figures on the other, were articulated by the New Right in a symbolic

⁹ For Foucault, these supplementary relations don't so much attempt to repress a black and queer identity as call it into being. Rather than pursue here the problematics of a further development of Derridean thought, semiotics and strict Foucauldian thinking, I will simply follow Smith's use of Derrida and reference Foucault for his thinking on discourse but not identity. It is important in this chapter, in which I will be exploring ways in which a right wing politics operated a discursive realm through the denial of the individual rights of a black gay man and a black lesbian woman, that I approach this analysis as an empowerment of the individual, although this way of working doesn't fit strict Foucauldian thought.

realm, to suggest the dangers of the relatively unknown and a security offered in the face of those dangers by the New Right political agenda.

Derrida's concept of "supplementarity" here exposes the artificiality of the binary categories which *doxa* attempts to establish as natural and *a priori*. Understanding the supplementary relationship which by repudiating one symbolic category, creates the space in which the other can exist, leads to an understanding that these categories are dynamic processes, and not God-given or ordained by natural law.

The passage in Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech¹⁰ which begins: "Nothing is more misleading than comparison between the Commonwealth immigrant in Britain and the American Negro" repeats the idea that black people are foreign to Britain several times, in such a manner as to naturalize it and drive it into our heads. It immediately marks any black presence in Britain as the result only of mid-twentieth century immigration, as if here were a wholly new problem to be dealt with. It does so by making no mention of the long history of black presence in Britain, nor the history of immigration legislation specifically directed at those who might be defined black (rather than at 'foreigners' in general including white Europeans) dating back to 1601 or, in the specific case of Jewish communities, back to the thirteenth century. In Benjamin's terms, this historical silencing is the conformism about to overpower the tradition of black British history (and all the implications of British colonialism in black British history). Even Olaudah Equiano, Francis 'Frank' Barber (Samuel Johnson's Jamaica-born servant and favourite, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds), the "lascars, blacks, ... women of colour" dancing in the pubs of Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1812)¹¹, and Dadabhai Naoroji (elected for the Central division of Finsbury in 1892 and regarded by the House of Commons as our first black MP¹²) are not safe from Enoch Powell if he wins.

¹⁰ Made in April 1968, at the annual meeting of the West Midlands Conservative Political Centre in Birmingham.

¹¹ Cited in Stallybrass and White, 1986.

¹² Source, e-mail correspondence with House of Commons Information Office.

Secondly, Powellism sets up two other (white) constituencies. Utilising the Classical style of rhetoric associated with the white upper classes, Powell established his discourse as separate from that of an irrational bunch of racist jobs. He was famously able to argue (in a January 1969 appearance on London Weekend Television's *Frost on Friday*) that he was not a racist, because his arguments were not based on concepts of race as superior (white) / inferior (black) but rather on the concept of difference – the very concept being used to counter racism at that time in a politics of multiculturalism. Second, white anti-racist liberals were figured in Powell's discourse as the 'enemy within'. Naive, well-meaning and dangerous, it was suggested in Powell's speech that they were selling their country out in the interests of a criminal black tide of immigration.

Powell operated symbolic feminine figures to great effect in the 'Rivers of Blood' speech. Following Gilroy's analysis (Gilroy, 1987), Smith describes how white Britannia is presented as an ageing feminine innocence in the story of an old lady, who is without male protection (and therefore entitled to manly indignation on our part), having lost her husband and two sons in the war (Powell can assume this story will be read through the popular post-war discourse, in which the old lady's sacrifice of the men of her family for her country would weigh as heavily as their sacrifice in laying down their lives). Gradually, her neighbourhood is occupied by more and more black families who even invade her home with unreasonable demands and whose children chant abuse at her in the street. Anti-racists are also feminised in the story of a "young girl", whose stubborn naive attempts to support black communities are as dangerous as the activities of the Third Column – fanatical Nazi spies embedded in British culture and feeding information with which they were trusted back to Germany in the Second World War. Our emotional response to these feminine figures is a realm within which whiteness can be generated and stamped with approval, blackness repudiated with disgust. (That old trap associating women with emotions comes on here in a whole new turn.)

A third figure created offers an illusory haven for black and gay people in Tory Party policy. Gilroy's analysis shows up the figure of the good black

entrepreneur, a figure created by Tory rhetoric within whom black people can come aboard the good ship Britannia (at a price). This figure reveals for Smith Tory construction of another figure: the good, closetted homosexual. By striving to fit in – be as white and heterosexual as a black or gay person can be – some members of the black and gay communities are offered the illusion of belonging in Britannia. In spite of their awareness of the problematic nature of New Right politics, Smith argues, British people – including black and gay citizens – voted Conservative during the Thatcher era because they craved the social order and consistency which a hegemonic project of Thatcherism claimed to offer¹³.

The idea of race and sexuality as figures through which social crisis is perceived and managed should not lead us to separate these two as different but equivalent processes. Smith shows how the New Right's discourse revolves around questions of the family. She quotes Margaret Thatcher speaking in an interview with *Women's Own* magazine:

A nation of free people will only continue to be great if family life continues and the structure of the nation is a family one.

Women's Own November 1987, cited Smith, 1994, p.222.

Gilroy (Gilroy, 1987) shows how central an ideal of 'family' was in Powell's politics of racism. References to the dangerous fertility and sexuality of black people are run together with anxiety about dangerous miscegenation in Powellism. Smith argues:

The Thatcherites did not ... make the mistake committed by the Bush-Quayle 1992 campaign: instead of deploying the anti-lesbian and anti-gay signifier in an isolated and extremist manner, they linked their homophobia to a wide range of popular concerns.

Smith, 1994, p.35.

Thatcherites positioned their homophobia as a rational morality against a hysterical 'Loony Left' liberalism already made out to be ridiculous because of its commitment to an anti-racism figured as naive, sentimental and treacherous. Thatcherites constituted themselves not as enemies of gays and lesbians, but as

¹³ Smith cites Slavoj Žižek's "cynical formula of the fetishist" (Smith, 1994, p.38) « Je sais bien, mais quand même » ("I know very well, but nevertheless"), describing this as the Lacanian 'lure' of the orderly society.

defenders of a beleaguered British family way of life (read: white, Christian, heterosexual and physically and mentally 'able') against an incoming tide of alien black cultures: criminal in the case of African and African-Caribbean communities, religious fanatics in the case of South Asian communities, desperate and undeserving 'boat people', in the case of Vietnamese refugees (not even Commonwealth members, Powell argued¹⁴). A further threat to the British family way of life was offered in the 1980s by diseased queers who should be dumped in that "cess-pool of their own making", as a Chief of Police (Anderson) infamously referred to Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome. Promiscuous gay life-style, unsanctified by the blessings of the Church, and attempts at "pretended family relationships" (Section 28), had led not only to the down-fall of gays themselves but were threatening that always already beleaguered castle: the 'normal' Englishman's home.¹⁵

Smith points out that during this time, legislation privileging particular white and heterosexual family values resulted in the tearing apart of black families and the forced separation of hundreds of lesbian mothers from their children. It was in this context that debates on Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1987-88 took place. This Section relates to education. It was argued in Thatcherite discourse that the classroom is only a supplement to the family¹⁶. Smith quotes from the Official Report to Standing Committee 'A' of 8th December 1987, arguments that teachers are "strangers" from "outside the home" and should only continue the teaching of sexuality which ought to "start in the family unit" (cited Smith, 1994, p.218). A family unit which is 'real', that is, and not the 'pretended family' condemned in Section 28. Rubin has pointed out (Rubin, 1992) how powerful is the appeal for the protection of children, and how it may be manipulated to work against minority sexualities.

¹⁴ Quoted Barker, 1981, p.28.

¹⁵ It is, of course, not spelled out in this moral panic that according to this account of the HIV/AIDS crisis, AIDS would only be able to infiltrate the sanctity of the British family home if one member of it stepped outside it for sex with someone who was already infected (because of their abnormal life-style habits). For example, if Mr. British Family had unprotected sex with a prostitute or a 'real' gay man.

¹⁶ *In loco parentis*, "in the place of parents", as it were – a phrase long associated in British upper class culture with teachers.

Although Smith shows how the New Right claimed that local government was being taken over by gay-friendly militants, she argues that the discourse they operated was not one of a simple straightforward bigoted hatred of gay people. It involved complicated figures of inclusion and exclusion. As well as the good closetted homosexual / bad queer activist figure, this discourse operated a sexist erasure of lesbian sexuality combined with a demonization of lesbian mothering. Tories depicted themselves standing on a rational middle ground between on the one hand bad queer activists and out-of-control socialists (the 'enemy within'), and on the other hand bigotted gay-bashers; standing together with good closetted homosexuals defending the 'normal' Briton against the threat of perversion.

The invisibility of the gay woman (which I showed above is one effect of the interaction of hegemonic conceptualisation of gender and sexuality) operates here so that only when lesbianism comes under the effects of other matrices of power such as race is it brought into political visibility. Smith argues that:

The lesbian figure is transformed ... into a dangerous figure in official discourse, but only where racist and sexist discourse coincide with homophobic discourse to produce the black lesbian and the lesbian parent as specific demons.

Smith, 1994, p.213.

She shows how the figure of the black lesbian was used to invalidate Labour Party support for 'politically correct' projects but in a significant omission, she doesn't discuss the one actual black lesbian and lesbian mother political figure in the public eye at this time: the Leader of Lambeth Council, Linda Bellos.

3.3 Linda Bellos and the New Right

In May 1986, the left wing inner London borough of Lambeth elected Linda Bellos Leader of the Council: a black Jewish mother of two children, divorcee and out lesbian. As an out black lesbian who was elected to public office, she is of importance to a British black and gay his/herstory. She was also made into a central symbolic figure in racist and homophobic New Right discourse. Through

an account of media treatment of Linda Bellos, I will examine how that discourse established itself as hegemonic. This will show the workings of the discourse in which my participants are producing performance.

On Bellos's election, the *Morning Star* of 20th May reported:

As a seasoned campaigner and having come through the GLC women's committee and Lambeth's lesbian and gay working party, Linda is expecting the gutter press to have a field day – but "I'm ready for them," she says.

Morning Star, 20.5.1986.

However, the immediate response of (some of) the mainstream press was cautious in tone, and even strikes one as relatively sympathetic:

Ms Bellos, a divorced mother of two children aged 9 and 11, is a feminist and has written on how she became a lesbian.

London Standard, 16.5.1986.¹⁷

The *Standard* went on to quote her article at some length, including her reflections on the difficulties of coming out. The *Standard* article gives about half its column space to Bellos's political interests and half to her lesbianism through direct quotes from her article. The *Daily Mail* offered this description:

Sitting in her office and wearing slacks and blazer, the 35-year-old self-styled 'hard-Left black feminist' said: 'I am a Lesbian and proud of it.'

But she believed that her sexual preference was an 'irrelevance' to her political role.

Miss Bellos said: 'I should be judged on our priorities as a Labour group to provide decent housing and social services for thousands of old and needy people.'

Daily Mail, 20.5.1986.

The description of Bellos belied her actual appearance, which in photos of the time is smart and feminine, usually wearing "slacks" but also often a necklace. She is often pictured grimly unsmiling but her loose curly hair style and large glasses soften a lean, intense face. Characteristically, the *Daily Mail* reporter draws on available signifiers to butch up Bellos's image into a *hard* Left feminist, an aggressively assertive black dyke. However, he also allows her wish to be judged as Council Leader on appropriate political action a significant and

¹⁷ She *became* a lesbian, presumably after giving birth as a heterosexual – an 'inauthentic' lesbian mother, as it were.

sympathetic voice. As with the *Standard* article, about half the column space is given to an account of Bellos as a serious political figure, and half the column space to telling us about how she is lesbian. Initial reports always mention Bellos's two children, but later reports completely drop reference to her as a mother. I suggest that this simplification helps the transformation of complicated human being: black Jewish lesbian mother, into political symbol: black lesbian.

This symbolic transformation begins in the media a month later, on Bellos's arrest in a demonstration. The *London Standard* ran the headline "Left-Wing Linda is arrested at bomb trial demo". The demonstration was outside the Old Bailey where an IRA bomb trial was under way, but was in protest at the strip-searching of Irish women remand prisoners in Brixton prison. The *Standard* was well aware that:

During the 18-day trial demonstrators have made repeated protests about the strip searching in Brixton of two women.

London Standard, 3.6.86.

They quoted Bellos's angry remark: "I'm just one of the Loony Lefties aren't I – part of rent-a-mob?", going on to say "Miss Bellos ... claims she was held at Snow Hill police station for more than two hours" as if there might be some doubt about the matter, thereby bringing into question Bellos's behaviour in joining a demonstration, rather than the police's practice in arresting her and other women.

Reference to Bellos's sexuality was reserved in this article for a small snippet in the middle:

Miss Bellos, who is 'a Lesbian and proud of it' claimed strip searching of women is done in a sexual manner to undermine their confidence.

ibid.

It's worth noting that her being lesbian is only brought up against a reference to an abuse of sexuality. This is probably not a deliberate piece of misrepresentation, but rather a reflection of the discourse of the time – in which lesbians are always already placed in the context of sex and usually in the context of sexual abuse and perversion.

We might expect the actual black lesbian to be scapegoated by the New Right for the social crisis of the Thatcher era. In an article for *City Limits* written four weeks after Bellos's election, Beatrix Campbell remarks:

Bellos is almost the caricature that the Daily Mail is searching for – a black, Jewish lesbian. She is, however, able-bodied.
City Limits, 5-12.6.1986.¹⁸

However, what the *London Standard* and national papers – both tabloids and broadsheets – actually focus on, is not Linda Bellos as a black lesbian, icon of everything that threatens the British family way of life and scapegoat through whom the problem can be resolved: send it away. What the press focus on is the figure of Bellos the hard left black feminist, the IRA sympathiser, the political woman¹⁹, involved in demonstrations ("She had protested many times outside the Old Bailey without harassment, including during the Yorkshire Ripper trial" (*London Standard*, 3.6.1986).) The national press were interested in Bellos as a 'Loony Lefty', member of a group collected together by the media which included Leader of the Greater London Council "Red" Ken Livingstone and black anti-racist MP Bernie Grant. They focussed on Bellos as the true heir to former Lambeth Council Leader "Red" Ted Knight. Following Smith's argument that the discourse operated by the New Right was more complex than a straightforward hatred of black and gay people, we should look for the black lesbian as a *hidden* symbolic figure. To scapegoat Bellos herself as an actual black lesbian would indeed have been to send the problem away. Bellos would have been the sacrificial goat on whom the sins of the tribe had been off-loaded. This would have left the New Right with no problem to heroically resolve. Attacking the single figure of Linda Bellos the out black lesbian would have made the Right appear petty and human, would have allowed Bellos to occupy that symbolic and heroic (therefore halfway to the Gods) role much loved in British politics: the underdog. The aim of the New Right was to set up a greater threat to the British family way of life than one black lesbian could pose. By referring to Bellos as a

¹⁸ It appears that it wasn't possible for left wing discourse to comprehend the anomaly of the mother who isn't heterosexual, either.

¹⁹ There are ways in which the press of the time made out political black women to be harpies and harridans, as I will show below.

hard left black feminist and allowing the public to infer her lesbianism, the New Right referenced a realm of the unmentionable, the unknown – a ritual, emotional realm. I will show how that hidden symbolic figure which must be inferred was deployed in a wider discourse of anti-racist policies as ridiculous, geared around a 'Loony Left'. To the New Right, the figure of the disabled black Jewish lesbian had been an important figure of ridicule. She was the non-existent constituency in whose interests left-wing policies were enacted by local government at the expense of a supposed vast majority of 'normal' people. It was important that, instead of emerging from her closet demanding the rights which the policies of local government offered, Linda Bellos remained the shadowy, near-mythical member of a Loony Tunes brigade.

Although the New Right concentrated on her as a symbolic figure, the actual Linda Bellos suffered the hostile attention of a manipulative media unprotected. She has described her two years in office as "among the most exciting and dramatic of my life" (in Mason-John (ed.), 1995, p.54) but she also speaks of the difficulties of media attention and of the lack of support from Labour Party leadership in the face of personal attacks made on her in the press.

3.3.1 Background – Lambeth, caught between the New Right and the Labour Party

At the time when Bellos became Leader of the Council, Lambeth was at the centre of events which marked the contemporary political landscape. Kobena Mercer writes of a crisis of the Left, in which "revolution" became a meaningful term only in the mouths of a radicalized right (Mercer, 1994, p.259). Following Powell, the New Right had co-opted the symbolic realm:

Neoconservatism dominates our ability to imagine the future by performing on the postmodern "frontier effect" in popular memory.
Mercer, 1994, p.267.

The postmodern understanding sees even the most recent past from an ironic distance. In the 1980s, the New Right seized on this perspective to characterise the egalitarian aspirations of the 1960s as romantic and unrealistic dreams. The attempts of the Left Wing to assert an egalitarian ethics in politics therefore

became laughable because revised as naïve. Mercer and Smith, following Stuart Hall, argue that New Right discourse was a hegemonic discourse. This meant that the Labour Party could only present its agenda through the terms of that discourse. This could only be done by completely changing the Labour Party agenda. Several left-wing local government authorities, who stood by the egalitarian ethos of a red-blooded socialism (including Lambeth borough council), were therefore refused the support of their nominal political party when they ran foul of the New Right.

This was a time of right-wing central government onslaught against local government, and of violent struggles in race and class politics: the Miners' strike and inner city 'race riots'. Lambeth contains the area of Brixton, where, on the weekend of April 10-12 1981, inner city rioting characterised as 'race riots' had erupted. In October 1985, a riot on the Broadwater Farm Estate in the North London area of Tottenham led to the murder of PC Keith Blakelock, for which four black men were only cleared after a long campaign. Shortly afterwards, a black woman – Mrs Cherry Groce, was shot and seriously injured by the police in a raid on her home in Brixton and this led to a second Brixton riot. Race politics of the time was volatile and violent, and was figured principally through a discourse of crime and policing. On the racist side, black people were treated as innately criminal; on the anti-racist side an increasingly vocal critique of this and other practices was being brought to bear particularly on the Metropolitan Police and British law courts. (See Gilroy, 1987, for a full account of these processes.)

In Lambeth, three other issues were cropping up in the news in the year and a half prior to May 1986. The first and most dominant was the refusal by Lambeth Council among others to submit to the Thatcher-led Government's policy of rate-capping. This was part of a New Right campaign of attrition against local government in which local government had been identified as a hot-bed of radical left-wing resistance to central (Tory) government but it was brought into a discourse of race politics by Janet Boateng and other Councillors who called it a 'racist' policy. The second issue in the news was an inquiry into the death of a black baby (Tyra Henry), which became much more of a media issue than the

earlier controversy about the death of a white baby in the borough. The third issue in the news was the decision by the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party to shut down black sections of local Labour Parties and the fight against this decision by constituency Labour Parties including Vauxhall, Bellos's constituency Labour Party. It is as one of three women going to the Labour Party annual conference to fight for recognition of the Black Sections that Linda Bellos first appears in the press (*South London News*, 27.9.1985. Her name is under her colleague Linda Boreland's photo and Boreland's name is under her photo.)

The papers were full of gleeful references to what were seen as absurd or extraordinary policies on the part of Lambeth Council – such as renaming streets in the area to reflect the interests of the local black community. In 1985, the year before Bellos's election, heterosexism awareness was being targetted for derision:

Lambeth school children may be given lessons in homosexuality,
Streatham News, 11.3.1985.

It's a mad mad world in Loony Lambeth

A new sin has just been discovered in Lambeth to be added to racism and sexism [the group Lesbian And Gay Employment Rights are to run] heterosexism awareness training courses
Daily Express, 1.11.1985.

In June 1985, Lambeth banned kissograms as sexist. The *Daily Mail* promptly sent one to Council Leader Ted Knight and attempted to make a splash article about his unwillingness to receive it. In October 1985, the *Financial Times* reported that the Commission for Racial Equality had been obliged to question Lambeth Council following a complaint by a right wing pressure group that their job advertisements discriminated in favour of black applicants. In January 1986, Lambeth decided to take seriously the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act of 1944, which stated that 3% of employees should be disabled people. When this led to problems over appointing a swimming pool lifeguard, the press reacted with predictable scorn.

As Bellos was elected, the following article appeared in *The Sun*:

Want a job?
ARE YOU disabled? Female? Black?
Gay, and preferably an unmarried moth-
er? **SUN 15/4/86**
 If you need a job, head for:
 Lambeth Town Hall, Brixton
 Hill, London SW2.
 Even though Ted Knight has
 been banned from office, his
 crackpot spirit lives on.
 The council has decided that
 from May 1 it will give jobs only
 to disabled applicants.
 Obviously, if there is competi-
 tion for the posts, you pile up
 points if you are black and sexu-
 ally eccentric.
 However, should you be white,
 male, able-bodied and sexually
 normal and living in Lambeth,
 what's your only hope?
On your bike!

Fig. viii: "Want a Job?" from *The Sun*, (15.4.1986).

Clearly aimed at undermining her identity without openly naming her, this article associates her with abnormality, immorality and the "crackpot spirit" of Ted Knight and the 'Loony Left'. It doesn't do so in wanton frivolity, but by sandwiching the article between the headline appeal "Want a job?" and the leader-type conclusion of "On your bike!" – Norman Tebbit's infamous retort to protests at the chronic unemployment in North England industrial towns – it positions the disabled, women, black people, gay people and unmarried mothers as undeserving²⁰ in a crisis of unemployment seen as the rightful domain of the "white, male, able-bodied and sexually normal".

Bellos was not the only member of the Council to be pilloried by the press because of her personal identity. Fellow member of Vauxhall Labour Party, Rachel Webb, was being repeatedly splashed in the papers at this time as "the former sex change lorry driver" (*South London* 18.4.1986) on the pretext of reporting the details of a loan to her from the London Tenants Organisation.

²⁰ The Victorian concept of the deserving and the undeserving poor is being drawn on here.

3.3.2 Media Representations of Linda Bellos

There are significant differences in the way in which different genres of the press approach Bellos as a public figure. I divided the reports I collected into: local papers, the black press, the left-wing press and the national press (including the *London Standard*).

The left-wing press (*New Statesman*, *City Limits*, *Morning Star*) were naturally sympathetic to a politics which in other genres of the press was marked 'Loony Left' and tried hard to be respectful to Bellos – without conspicuous success. The October 1986 *New Statesman* article is typical in being unwillingly marked by 'Loony Left' discourse. Although it argues that Lambeth pursuing policies to their ultimate conclusion is impractical, its tone is wistful rather than derisory. A September article by Kate Pullinger (winner of a *City Limits* short story competition) is more pernicious. A Canadian at that time squatting a house in Bloomsbury, Pullinger writes about her nostalgia for her previous squat in what was then regarded as the socially problematic area of Brixton. She describes "a year of pleasant dinner parties and evening salons in a doomed Lambeth Council property", sneering at the "platoon" of police, bailiffs, etc, who came to evict her flatmate and her, "smashing up our flat" (presumably after some notice had been given, since Pullinger says they had already moved out).

We ducked out under the picture of a naked woman with which they had festively decorated the stairwell, proving yet again that Labour, Lambeth especially, really cares. Linda Bellos, you should have been there.

New Statesman, 26.9.1986.

The cynicism with which this privileged young squatter references Bellos's lesbian identity by the picture of a naked woman, offers us some insight into the hard words with which Campbell ended her June 1986 article:

Bellos says she'd rather be in among [the sectarian games of the white left] than 'among those fucking white liberals in the women's movement – and you can print that!'

City Limits, 5-12.6.1986.

In a hegemonic discourse like that which the New Right created, repudiation of black or lesbian figures may be subtly and unconsciously enacted by those who

are trying to work for anti-racist and anti-homophobic values. It may be safer to stay away from allies like Kate Pullinger, whose inadvertently homophobic remarks may be harder to pin down but just as corrosive as outright insult.

The local press showed a divided face. On occasion, racism and homophobia played on their pages but not as the sophisticated strategies which were operated in the national press. As a rule, their remit was simply the reporting of local events and issues, such as "Council boss held by cops" (*South London Press*, 3.6.1986) or "Meet Cllr Linda Bellos Lambeth's new Leader who loves gardening" (*New Life*, 30.5.1986).

The black press picked up Bellos as a figurehead in the community, under headlines such as: "Lambeth's First Black Woman Leader" (*Asian Times*, 23.5.1986). They frequently showed her at launches and other events such as the occasion of the local Tesco banning South African goods. The *Caribbean Times* of 22nd August 1986 printed an article by her to mark the Notting Hill Carnival of that year. The black press avoided any mention of Bellos's lesbian identity or more controversial left wing political activity. For obvious reasons, they were more sympathetic to the anti-racist policies of Lambeth Council and therefore resisted being drawn into the 'Loony Left' discourse, although they weren't capable of providing any strong critique of it, nor an alternative discourse. (This was partly because of their homophobic refusal to engage with a politics of sexuality as well as a politics of race, as can be seen more clearly in their response to Justin Fashanu's coming out – see below.)

It is in the national press (I include the *London Standard* here) that Linda Bellos appears as an iconic figure referencing the ritualistic realm of symbols and emotions that was the Tories' battle for Britain and white heterosexual family life. This can clearly be seen in the analysis of articles on the Labour Party Conference of 1986. A final struggle was taking place over the black sections of the Labour Party and Bellos was quoted by all the national newspapers. The *Daily Mail* set its tone the day before the debate, in an article entitled "Spitting fury of Bellos and the Hell Cats". It described Bellos as one of a group of women shrieking abuse at Roy Hattersley:

'Don't you know that slavery has finished,' one of the women, Linda Bellos, yelled at him.

Daily Mail, 1.10.1986.

We aren't told why she might have hurled such an accusation at Hattersley. This therefore appears as an irrational unreasonable demand, the act of a madwoman who doesn't have any real complaint so spitefully digs up that old bone the history of slavery (too old to be relevant today). Nor does Bellos re-appear in the piece, but she is associated with the other women John Edwards describes as the piece develops:

In the Labour Party these days there are so many groups they need to bring out a directory. There is the Left, Far Left, Hard Left and Militant. And there are the Labour Hell Cats.

ibid.

The implication here is that there are left-wing politicians who are misguided but serious, and there are women. These left-wing women are of two types. Sharon Atkin and Diane Abbot are in one group:

On stage next to Sinn Fein and Benn, Sharon Atkin, Labour candidate for Nottingham ranted over Kinnock and Hattersley...

Sharon Atkin is in a race with Diane Abbot to be the first black MP. Diane Abbot sat beside her. When they both talked together they could shout down the noise of a train.

ibid.

Atkin and Abbot were seen to be competing, even though they were sitting on a platform together (NB with Sinn Fein members and Tony Benn). They were characterised as noisy, not behaving in the way a (white English) lady should behave, as political harpies or harridans.

The 'Hell Cats' were not Bellos, Atkin and Abbot – who were all established political figures who just happened to be black women, but a group of sexually deviant, politically subversive, militant women who behaved like men:

Say we're all lesbians if you like, one of them said, stamping off into the fog.

...

They drank the beer like steel workers coming off shift.

...

One of the women had a hammer and sickle arm-band. Her hair was a bristle of two inch spikes. It looked like a hedgehog had died on her head.

Daily Mail, 1.10.1986.

Bellos, Atkin and Abbot were guilty by association – especially Bellos the out lesbian, who was identified by the headline of the article as Queen Hell Cat.

The *Daily Mail* account only differs in tone from the following day's article in the *Financial Times*:

Hope for 'black sections' crushed.

...

Ms Linda Bellos, leader of Lambeth council, urged the party's national executive to demonstrate its understanding of what the black community was saying and not seek to impose solutions on it in the way President P.W. Botha of South Africa sought to impose solutions like the homelands "on our black sisters and brothers".

Financial Times, 2.10.1986.

The polite tone of the *Financial Times*'s language makes all the more cutting its use of Bellos's words, while disguising its demolition of her position as neutral reportage. As does the *Daily Mail*, it doesn't contextualise her remark so it isn't apparent that Bellos was arguing that the creation of an Afro-Asian Advisory Committee would separate African and Asian interests in a similar destructive and racist fashion to divisions between 'black' and 'coloured' in the South African system of apartheid. "[O]ur black brothers and sisters" is not the kind of phrase *Financial Times* readers are likely to use. Bellos's argument appears to be inflammatory nonsense because a term has been dropped out of it, and she is being carefully marked as not 'one of us' *FT* readers.

Bellos is very rarely depicted alone. Typical is a *Daily Mail* column of 9th October 1986 in which Bellos is associated with other names of the 'Loony Left'.

They'll be back to hound you, Neil.

There's a great mystery about last week's Labour Party Conference. Putting on my deerstalker and imitating the words of Sherlock Holmes: 'It's the strange affair of the dog that didn't bark.'

Whatever happened to Ken Livingstone, 'Red' Ted Knight, Bernie Grant, Linda Bellos, and Labour's other dangerous and loony Left-Wing local council leaders?

Even though they usually can't stop talking, last week we didn't hear a boo from them. It was as if they didn't exist.

Daily Mail, 9.10.1986.

The column finishes by warning us not to be deceived. The Labour Party will follow the militant line.

Left-wing national press is complicit in this discourse. Smith has shown that the New Right established its discourse not as the better of several political strategies but as the only political discourse available. *The Guardian* of 7th November 1986 ran what purported to be a left-wing sympathetic analysis of a swing to the Conservatives in the election polls. It suggested a number of 'frightener' strategies the Tory party might use: the economy, defence, "the spectre of extremism - the argument that behind the Labour Party ... there lurks the party of Militant. Ted Knight, Bernie Grant and Linda Bellos."

There will be other frighteners too. Indeed in this week's *Daily Mail* the dependable Paul Johnson has launched a new charge that a Labour government, because of its solicitude for gays and its weaknesses on immigration, would be soft on the battle against AIDS.

The Guardian, 7.11.1986.

We can see here how sexuality and race were both pulled through the political hoop of a moral panic about AIDS. As my thesis argues, they operate not as separate 'vectors of power' (as Rubin and Butler call them) but intertwined in particular contexts where they can support each other. They work not just in the words of Thatcher and Powell, but in those of the left wing as well. *The Guardian* didn't rebut but merely replicated New Right discourse, re-using figures such as the 'softness' of the Labour Party and a 'battle against AIDS'. They also replicated while pretending merely to report, the strategy of using 'Militant' as an electoral 'frightener'. They did so by illustrating the article with photos of Bellos, Grant and Knight (under the by-line, "faces the Conservatives will use as electoral frighteners: Linda Belos [sic] (top), Bernie Grant (below left), and Ted Knight."). This pictorial lay-out made it seem at first glance as if the militant tendency was the most important factor in a coming electoral defeat.

The crushing of 'militant' left-wing politicians as a bunch of deluded fanatical sympathisers to a ridiculous black and gay constituency outside the bounds of 'normal' society and social decency was an extraordinary success. As Smith points out, Thatcherism managed to constitute itself as not just a political

discourse but *the only* political discourse. We can see in analyses of black and left-wing sympathetic press that no alternative discourse is developed. The Labour Party turned on its own left wing in a shameful political expediency and so the governing party we are left with today bears no resemblance to the 1980s left wing of political conviction which struggled to realise socialism in the face of racism, homophobia, sexism and ableism as well as class politics. Linda Bellos was placed at the heart of that struggle: represented as queer, as 'not us' *City Limits* and *New Statesman* readers, let alone *Financial Times* readers. What she actually said would always be edited in particular ways, whether it was the black press silent on her lesbian identity or the national press symbolising her – the Leader of one borough council – as a gigantic figure in a mad socialist dream world.

In the terms of the Bourdieu/Derrida figure I have been developing, Linda Bellos's situation might be represented thus:

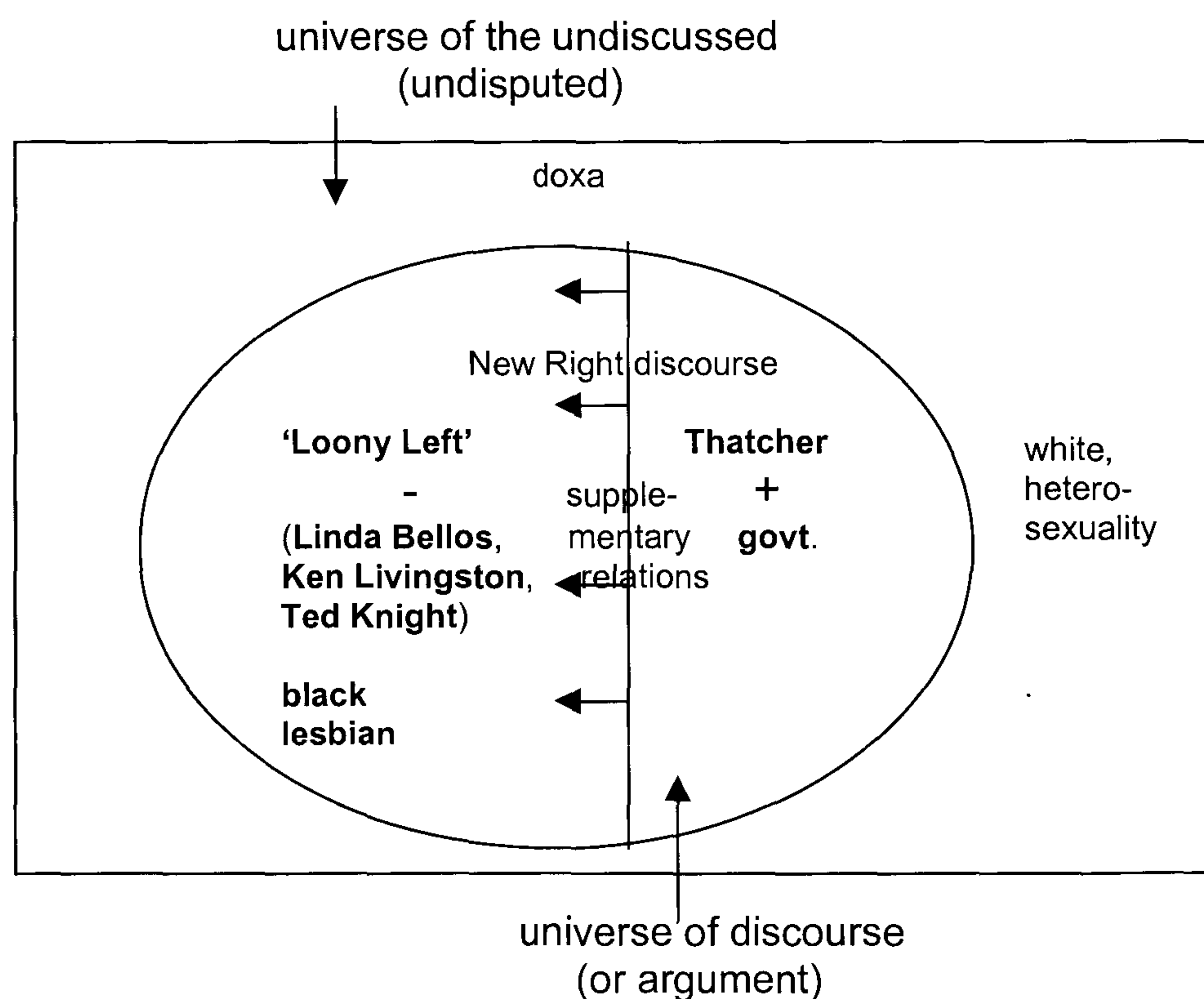


Fig. ix: Linda Bellos's situation in diagrammatic form adapted from Bourdieu, 1977.

As in Smith's original argument (see *fig. vii*), the Thatcher government makes a space by repudiating symbolic outsider-figures: the 'Loony Left' and its constituency, the mythical black lesbian. Left wing policies were pushed into the symbolic realm of the outsider figure and we can see that the Labour Party disappears in this symbolic dynamic. Not only did this leave Thatcherite politics as the only space for a serious political party to occupy, but also – underneath the "argument" of New Right discourse – it enabled white-ness and heterosexuality to be read as self-evident, *a priori* and natural²¹.

The establishment of this hegemony means that those who are black and queer are "muted". Bourdieu remarks in relation to *doxa*:

As we have seen in the case of the domestic conflicts to which marriages often give rise, social categories disadvantaged by the symbolic orders, such as women and the young, cannot but recognize the legitimacy of the dominant classification in the very fact that their only chance of neutralizing those of its effects most

contrary to their own interests lies in submitting to them in order to make use of them

Bourdieu, 1977, pp.164-5

The Marxist feminist anthropologist Edwin Ardener also describes how those "disadvantaged by the social orders" are unable to articulate their interests except through submitting to dominant classification, in "muted" group theory. Ardener addresses himself to "the difficulty of dealing ethnographically with women" (Ardener, 1968, p.3). He suggests that male project participants appear "articulate" compared to female project participants, because of masculine bias in the ethnographic way of working. (Ardener explicitly links the problem of "inarticulacy" of women project participants and the problem of lack of advancement of women anthropologists.) In his afterword "The 'Problem' Revisited", he explains:

One of the problems that women presented was that they were rendered 'inarticulate' by the male structure; that the dominant structure was articulated in terms of a male world-position. Those who were not in the male world-position, were, as it were, 'muted'.

²¹ It's at this point that I could develop a Foucauldian argument that this apparent repression or repudiation of the black lesbian in fact calls her into being. Instead, I seek to figure how this discursive formation impacts on those who are repressed-repudiated/called into being.

....

We may speak of 'muted groups' and 'articulate groups' along this dimension. There are many kinds of muted groups. We would then go on to ask: 'What is it that makes a group muted?' We then become aware that it is muted simply because it does not form part of the dominant communicative system of the society – expressed as it must be through the dominant ideology, and that 'mode of production', if you wish, which is articulated with it. (From transcript of discussion 7 July 1973.)

Ardener, 1975, pp.21-22.

Hegemony, a matrix of power in (what Foucault calls) discourse²², is assumed to be unquestionable and *a priori*. Its undisputed, 'natural', self-evident character relies on its being mirrored by a universe of discourse (Bourdieu), which it contains. This universe of discourse is based on a binary opposition, and may be a supplementarity in which an "outsider figure" is created and repudiated to make an illusory space. In the case of race and sexuality in Britain following particularly explicit New Right policies of the Thatcher era, 'black' and 'queer' were designated outsider figures in order to make ideal (white) and (heterosexual) spaces, constituting a hegemony based around the British nation and the British (nuclear) family. Within this hegemony 'black' and 'queer' people are "muted" groups. We are unable to articulate our interests except through the mechanisms which feed the interests of the dominant group. Anna Marie Smith shows how in New Right discourse, gay people and black people were invited to take part in the Tory Party's project but only as the good (closetted) homosexual and – Gilroy's formulation – the good black entrepreneur. We may only express our interests in the terms of the dominant discourse which ultimately serve dominant interests. In the following analysis of Justin Fashanu's coming out in *The Sun* newspaper, I will show what happened when a black gay man tried to tell his story from within the terms of dominant group interest.

²² I am obliged here to use the word 'discourse' in the two slightly different senses in which Foucault and Bourdieu use it.

3.4 1990 – Justin Fashanu²³

1990 was a year marked by significant events for gay communities. This was the year in which Queer Nation was founded in the States and Outrage in Britain, the year when Sedgwick published *Epistemology of the Closet* and Butler *Gender Trouble*. During the 1990s, gay assimilationist policies were cast into the shade by the flamboyant politics of queer and in academic circles, queer theory was to seep through to some unlikely places (sometimes as a formula bearing little resemblance to the thinking of Sedgwick and Butler). Most notably for the black gay communities, 1990 was the year in which the footballer Justin Fashanu came out as gay in *The Sun*.

As Plummer's study²⁴ shows, the 'coming out' story is of crucial significance for a gay person's sense of identity. Valerie Mason-John remarks that she was envious of black women who had a 'coming out' story to tell (see Chapter Six); it's as if she has missed out on one of the stages of initiation if she has no painful experience²⁵ of the assertion of sexual identity in the face of family resistance. In this context, we can understand that Fashanu's very public coming out in the face of social disgust remains enormously significant to the black gay communities.

Fashanu's story also needs to be understood in the context of the political strategy 'outing'. The queer movement's periodic threat to 'out' major public figures who were known by the gay communities to be gay (some of whom were supporting homophobic legislation in government), caused widespread indignation in gay and straight circles. However, Fashanu's story is one that shows that 'outing' was never realistically a gay strategy, rather it was the strategy of the heterosexist moral majority and of the so-called 'gutter' press; a pressure constantly working on the gay celebrity whose career could be seriously affected by salacious revelations of h/er private life. In spite of the queer movement's occasional threats, the silence of so many about even the most

²³ I am indebted to Ajamu and Colin King for their contributions to this section.

²⁴ Plummer's study is problematic because it places the narratives of gay people and survivors of child abuse together without interrogating the differences between these 'sexual' stories.

²⁵ Nothing marks us as efficiently as pain.

loathed members of the gay communities remains as widespread as it is mysterious.

Justin Fashanu was the first black footballer to be signed for a million pounds. He was nineteen when he hit the headlines with a spectacular goal for Norwich City; he was signed by Brian Clough for a million pounds shortly afterwards. He was very much in the public eye, notorious for a difficult relationship with Clough. Allegations that he was gay led to him making a successful prosecution a few years before he came out in 1990.

The surface story in *The Sun* "revelations" was that life in the closet is intolerable to a decent citizen, and that Fashanu wanted to offer young gays and lesbians an iconic public figure with whom they could identify with pride. An article from *The Voice* newspaper suggests another motive. They quoted the former agent of Justin Fashanu's brother John (John Fashanu was then at the peak of his own football career):

"Justin called me last week saying that a national paper was about to do an exposé about him being gay," says Hall. "My first reaction was that we should sue, but then Justin revealed to me that the allegations were true.

"... We decided that the best thing was to come clean. So my role was to shop around for the best deal for him."

Eric Hall, quoted in *The Voice*, 30.10.1990.

Eric Hall's account suggests a forced emergence from the closet – a sort of shotgun coming out. Then there was the question why Fashanu should have decided to come out in the notoriously racist and homophobic tabloid *The Sun*. From the beginning, this was felt to cast doubt on his motives.

Justin Fashanu's coming out is a split story. Eric Hall goes on in *The Voice* to say:

I honestly believe that he sold the story to *The Sun* was because he wanted to come clean [sic]. He may have needed the money as well – I mean, we could all do with a bit of money. But I think the real reason was that he was tired of hiding the fact that he was gay.

ibid.

Fashanu is reputed to have been paid about fifty thousand pounds for his story. The story was manipulated by *The Sun* and in the following weeks he was castigated in the press, although he was also fiercely defended. In 1998, as another media storm loomed over him, Justin Fashanu took his own life, leaving a letter which casts at least some of the blame on the press. Some would argue that in selling his story to a paper like *The Sun*, he was 'asking for it'. I think we must take a feminist line like that in cases of rape. Walking into a dangerous situation does not constitute responsibility for abuse inflicted by those we might have thought twice about trusting.

3.4.1 *The Sun* stories

The split story which Eric Hall described was already being played out in the pages of *The Sun*. On the one hand there was a narrative which black lesbians, bisexuals and gay men had no trouble in disentangling from its sensationalist trappings. The American black gay men's magazine *BLK*, in a retrospective article, commented:

Most of the actual text of the *Sun*'s interviews, which ran over several days, reveal a confession of sorts from Fashanu. Relieved to "come clean," after so many years of duplicity, the real revelation was of a man who struggled with his Christian faith and his homosexuality, who had the walls of his closet preventing him from reaching out to his lesbian and gay brothers and sisters. Although Fashanu's ex-lovers included footballers and a married Conservative MP, it was the closet that ruined Fashanu's every attempt of having a relationship.

The revelation initially provided Fashanu with a great deal of relief even though the *Sun* twisted his words and the context of his meanings.

BLK (undated), Vol 4, No 3, Whole 37.

In the articles, Fashanu spoke about loneliness, he tried to convey a message about the decency of the gay life-style. He touched on questions about being a proper citizen, and he talked about his equally famous footballer brother John.

I was 20 years old and on £1,000 a week. Yet I felt lonely.
The Sun, (Monday) 22.10.1990.

I found that gays were attractive, fun people who really knew how to party. I could relax with them.

...

it has never been the sex so much as the friendship, the caring. That is what I look for most.

...

My affairs were not wham-bang things, even though I did not have long relationships.

A lot of the people I slept with – some were First Division footballers, some TV personalities, became good friends.

...

Recently I went to San Francisco, I liked it because gays are accepted as proper citizens – as they should be anywhere in the world.

The greatest thing about getting all this off my chest now is that I won't have to live the lie any longer.

The Sun, (Tuesday) 23.10.1990.

I suppose Clough thought I was round the bend when I wanted to visit the Kray twins in prison.

But, through my Christianity, I was serious.

The Sun, (Wednesday) 24.10.1990.

I love my brother John deeply – but along the way we have had countless bust-ups and fights.

He pleaded with me desperately not to say I was gay.

...

Yes, it is going to affect him in a negative way and I'm sorry if it embarrasses him.

But I don't think I'm selfish when I say John is not the major issue here. He's not the child on the street with the dilemma about his – or her – sexuality.

The Sun, (Thursday) 25.10.1990.

Fashanu's brother John was an important figure in the split story. His vocal protests about Justin's coming out allowed for him to be positioned in opposition to John: "STRAIGHT talking from STRAIGHT guy John" (*Daily Mirror*, (Monday) 29.10.1990). This was one of many strategies adopted by the tabloid press to undercut the narrative Justin Fashanu wanted to tell. Fashanu's own narrative had to be allowed. The upright citizen "coming clean" was the ostensible justification for the razzamatazz with which *The Sun* treated what it would normally (and very publicly) argue was a matter of private personal life. *The Sun* was no longer able to righteously drag Justin Fashanu out of the closet,

instead, it had to honour his voluntary emergence. *The Sun* virtuously digging the dirt on a shamed Justin Fashanu hiding his filthy secret had to be replaced by *The Sun* as medium through which Fashanu could come clean. However, they made sure that Fashanu remained (in Mary Douglas's definition) 'dirt' – "matter out of place"; they kept Fashanu in the position of "outsider figure" in a New Right discourse on race and sexuality.

Although the basic narrative: Fashanu as a decent (homosexual) man doing a decent thing in coming out can't be altered, *The Sun* embeds it in contradicting text and pictures. Its first front page splash when it broke the story: "£1M SOCCER STAR: I AM GAY Justin Fashanu confesses", promised that Fashanu:

has revealed how he
 BEDDED a Tory MP and romped with him in the House of
 Commons
 SLEPT with top soccer players and stars of TV and pop music
 SNEAKED away from his team-mates' "bird-haunts" after matches
 to pay secret visits to gay bars.

The Sun, 22.10.1990.

The romp in the House of Commons turns out to be an invitation to come to a late debate and then look round while the chamber was being cleaned. It seems clear from Fashanu's narrative that having slept with the married MP once, he discontinued the affair as "he was just not for me" (*The Sun*, 23.10.1990). The two remained friends, "We went to clubs and parties together, but I resisted the sexual side." What, then, was the romp? Justin Fashanu sat in the Speaker's Chair. Margaret Thatcher is supposed to have heard of the incident and ticked off the MP concerned. *The Sun* managed to make this sound like a salacious sexual scandal, running it under the by-line: "Gay romeo is roasted by Maggie", without specifying whether it was Fashanu or the MP who was a "gay romeo" (the soubriquet 'romeo' in this instance implying someone who roams about flirting with whoever they can find, rather than the faithful lover unto death of Shakespeare).²⁶

²⁶ A black gay bum daring to sit on the Speaker's chair in the Thatcher era seems like a meaningful statement to me, but I doubt that *The Sun* appreciated its full symbolic richness.

Even though the series of articles are about Fashanu's open acknowledgement that he is gay, *The Sun* constructed a heterosexual framing of true love for him, headlining the first article in the series: "I CHEATED ON MY GIRL TO GO OUT WITH MEN". The use of 'my girl' - a phrase of particular affection, rather than 'my girlfriend' works to support this frame. The article even managed to end with a statement by the girlfriend (of eight years back):

Last night Justin's former live-in girlfriend Julie said she still loves the soccer ace.

The Sun, 22.10.1990.

Her actual words undercut this Mills and Boon tone:

"I still love Justin. He's a nice person and we're still friends.

"I know he has been thinking for some time about telling all regarding his private life.

"But it is his business, not mine, and I don't wish to get involved."

ibid.

It's customary for tabloid papers to illustrate news articles about male sports stars with a full body-shot showing the star in virile action. Justin Fashanu was a striker, the agent of a famous example of the macho sporting action, scoring a goal. However, not one of the eight photographs illustrating the four articles over which *The Sun* spread Justin Fashanu's interview shows him scoring a goal. One sporting shot shows him half-body with arm up-raised and fist clenched in pleased triumph, and is subtitled: "FLASH ... goal ace Fashanu in action". (He is post-active, not "in action".) Three times he is depicted outside the House of Commons, scene of the so-called "romp" out of which *The Sun* made as much mileage as it could. Once he is pictured full body standing by a river, sub-titled: "STANDING PROUD ... Footballer Justin Fashanu has stopped trying to hide the truth about his homosexuality" (this shot belongs to the Fashanu narrative in the split story). He is pictured gently cradling a football in front of a net (the opposite of scoring a goal) and once smiling a fetching smile, sprawled in a tracksuit on a park bench. Curiously passive, his smile winning and his stance softened where possible, Fashanu was feminised (as much as a "soccer ace" can be) by the photographic accompaniments to the interviews.

(Whether or not most readers would pick up on the park bench connection to parks as cruising areas for gay men is a debatable question.) No longer the sign of masculinity: a footballer, a striker²⁷, Fashanu is now a feminised symbol. He is that best possible expression of the relatively unknown (as symbol is defined in Turner, 1967, p.26). *The Sun* made sure that we understood the relatively unknown to be a realm of the weird and unpleasant.

Fashanu's narrative raised questions about what it means to be a "proper citizen" on several occasions, but *The Sun* didn't allow his questions full voice. He was allowed to present the conclusion he had come to: that gay people can be "proper citizens" if we are accepted as in San Francisco; "gays were attractive, fun people who really knew how to party"; a gay man such as Fashanu himself could choose to maintain caring close friendships rather than "wham-bang" affairs. This narrative seeks to position gay people as 'Good As You', in a hetero-normative frame of citizenship and monogamy. Fashanu was not allowed to present fully the questions represented by his Christianity and his desire to visit the actual sexual pervert Peter Sutcliffe in prison. Fashanu's Christianity was presented not as a faith that guided him "I ... asked for God to come into my life. And he did." (*The Sun*, 22.10.1990) or one that troubled him: "I know that homosexuality is not right – not in the teachings of the Bible" (*ibid*), but as something which made him an odd-ball: "I FOUND GOD IN A GARAGE" (*ibid*). His desire to visit Sutcliffe and the Kray brothers is not gone into in depth. Under the titles: "I'M GAY! Day three of a soccer stunner. CLOUGH TOLD ME TO SEE A SHRINK! Says Justin Fashanu" a confused and rambling account of Fashanu's visits to the Kray brothers in their separate prisons was sandwiched between some apparently random thoughts on his notoriously bad relationship with Brian Clough.

The use of these particular stories of Fashanu's life disrupt his 'Good As You' narrative. They set him up not as someone seeking a monogamous relationship who successfully sustains warm friendships, but as an odd person

²⁷ A black sportsman – Back shows how blackness can be referenced (Hall's doubling of fear and desire) by otherwise racist white men to signal an admirable masculinity (Back, 1996, pp.85-88).

drawn to criminals and perverts. Juxtaposing his desire to spend time with murderers and gangsters to his account of the relationship in which Clough bullied him (at one point calling the police to keep him away from training) makes it look like Fashanu was the one with the personality problem. This depiction of Fashanu as having a personality disorder is reinforced by manipulation of his words, which are reported in short, choppy sentences with few contractions and many sudden leaps into *non sequiturs*. For example, here, from talking about his brother John: "there is going to be some uneasiness and discomfort for him", Fashanu seems to shift suddenly:

There is no one in the world who played tougher soccer than me. No-one. No-one can say I'm not a man.

So you can call me gay but only a fool will call me effeminate.

Take it from me, fear has never been a word which has featured very highly in the Fashanu household.

But I remember there was one day in Bristol when I thought I'd end up dead – and the police agreed.

The Sun, 25.10.1990.

As readers, we get the peculiar impression of a person who, seemingly out of nowhere, ranted about his toughness and masculinity, then skipped off to an incident of threatened violence.

Under the title "Proud", Fashanu went on not to report gay pride and a queer bashing but "the worst foul of my career".

I'm not proud to admit it but yes, I head-butted him. Splosh, it was all over the place.

ibid.

This seemingly faithful reportage of colloquialisms feels stilted and cold. Fashanu's final words in the series of interviews are:

I'm a calculating person. If people keep chipping away they're going to end up hurt.

ibid.

The way in which his words were trotted out: short, choppy sentences without rhythmic variance, made them appear calculated (and him calculating). Often, *The Sun* quoted Fashanu saying 'there is', 'I am' rather than a more 'normal' sounding 'there's', 'I'm' and this lent a mechanical tone to his words. Leaving us with a final aggressive quote rounds off that character. In the documentary made

on his death in 1998, *Shot Down in Flames*, people spoke of Fashanu's great personal charm (although they also spoke of more problematic sides to his character) but *The Sun* doesn't do so. Maybe the choppy incoherent style of the articles is just typical bad *Sun* writing? A comparison with a later article on John Fashanu will show this is not the case.

In four interviews we move a long way from Justin Fashanu "Standing proud", the man who had long-standing friendships with former lovers rather than "wham-bang" affairs, whose ex-girlfriend remained a close friend of whom Fashanu spoke with respect and tenderness:

she is the most wonderful girl. She would make someone a beautiful wife.

The Sun, 22.10.1990.

The second article gave us the 'gay romeo' romping in the House of Commons, the third someone who Clough thought should see 'a shrink', someone who wanted to go and meet Sutcliffe and the Kray brothers. The fourth article, after a discussion of how John Fashanu has reacted to Justin's coming out, offered in detail the story of Justin perpetrating such a disgusting foul on an Aston Villa player that he had to be escorted off the grounds by police for his own protection.

It was at this final stage that Fashanu's brother John was brought into play. Justin spoke of his repeated attempts to talk to John and explain the situation. However, remarks such as: "I don't think I'm selfish He's not the child on the street with the dilemma about his – or her – sexuality" weren't backed up by external text in *The Sun*. Rather, a wealth of material began to suggest that John Fashanu was having a hard time:

He pleaded with me desperately not to say I was gay.

And now he says he might have to leave the country because of the stigma

The Sun, 25.10.1990²⁸.

STRAIGHT talking from STRAIGHT guy John

MY WEEK OF HELL!

Daily Mirror headline, (Monday) 29.10.1990.

²⁸ It was Justin who left the country, for Canada, where he was said to "sorting out his future" (*The Voice*, 30.10.1990).

Following the series of interviews with Justin Fashanu, neither *The Sun* nor any other paper published any material whatsoever about whether he was experiencing homophobic abuse, or isolation, or was in hiding as a result of media pressure following his coming out. Instead, *The Sun* ran an article in the sports pages of their issue of Monday 29.10.1990, on John Fashanu's "week of torment":

FASH BASHES GAY JIBES

Fashanu suffered cruel jibes almost throughout the match – wolf whistles every time he touched the ball and chants that questioned his sexual preference.

Fash added: "I needed that goal badly. That's the best possible way to shut them up – let your football do the talking."

The Sun, 29.10.1990

Throughout the article, reportage of John's speech was easy and fluid, with naturally placed contractions and colloquialisms, showing us what a nice normal guy he was. The fluency of this article is striking in comparison to the incoherence of the four articles on Justin Fashanu.

"Fash the Bash" as he was nick-named, showed his red-blooded heterosexual masculinity in the ultimate act of scoring a goal; there was none of the racism in this piece which characterised the report of only a month earlier:

I LIKE THE TASTE OF WHITE MAN'S BLOOD! – that's what Fashanu told his injured opponent

The Sun, 24.9.1990.

There was no need to muddle the question of sexuality by raising questions of race which would only confuse the already complex split story being told. Rather than signify the desirable masculinity of blackness (which Hall, 1988 and Back, 1996 identify), *The Sun* raised the symbolic realm of doubt and uncertainty through a feminised figure. They endowed this figure with a weird, cold personality and then reassured us with a brother sign: John – normal heterosexual male scoring a goal on our behalves.

3.4.2 Reactions in *The Voice*

The Sun didn't need to work hard at its representation of a gay Justin Fashanu as a weird, cold and un-natural pervert. Even sympathetic people, like Eric Hall and the writer of the retrospective article in *BLK*, speak of Fashanu's coming out in terms of a "confession" and "coming clean". Reactions in *The Voice* newspaper show how homosexuality was for most so associated with sin and shame that even when describing Justin Fashanu as "standing proud" and glad, finally, to be out of the closet, readers of *The Sun* would figure him to be a disgusting pervert. Here we can also see the resistance of black politics to the plurality of voices which Mercer suggests had been rising in the 1980s. As I argued above in relation to their representation of Linda Bellos, the black press couldn't develop an alternative discourse to the hegemonic New Right discourse partly because of a failure to tackle homophobia (or sexism, which it frequently reproduces), along with racism. It could only occupy a small space within that discourse, struggling to assert anti-racist values through a good black entrepreneurial voice.

The Voice picked up immediately on the John for Justin substitution, and was able to reinforce its line with virtuous indignation at anything which might be reported in the 'gutter' press. The story was splashed over the front cover of their issue of October 30, 1990:

Angry soccer ace John Fashanu has slammed his gay brother Justin for 'telling all' in a series of sordid newspaper articles, claiming the gay love confessions have tarnished the Fashanu name, and that Justin is an 'outcast'. In an exclusive interview John tells of the hurt his brother's 'coming out' has caused.

The Voice, 30.10.1990.

The editorial line of *The Voice* is to report events of relevance to the (African-Caribbean) black community, and to promote positive images of and for black people. Hence, their support for Linda Bellos as Leader of Lambeth Council, and silence about her out lesbian identity and hard left politics. As Mercer remarks (Mercer, 1994) pluralization of black identities had become a key theme in the 1980s. This ideological concept was picked up by *The Voice* in a superficial manner, without its feminist principles being fully translated into *The*

Voice policy. In an ironic twist, their issue of October 30 carried a positive report entitled 'Gay hate on the up':

Anti-gay feeling is rising alarmingly within the black community, according to officials from this year's International Black Gay and Lesbian Conference.

....

"One of our big problems is the religious strength in the black community. Many black Christians are very bigoted and homophobic and you can't reason with that type of dogma," commented a member of the Peckham Black Lesbian Group.

ibid.

Besides its front page splash, *The Voice* carried five articles condemning Justin Fashanu's coming out, including Marcia Dixon's column in the religious pages:

To read that during the course of his Christian life he was continually conducting homosexual affairs seems totally absurd, because it would mean that his Christianity had no effect whatsoever on his conduct.

ibid.

The editorial condemned Justin Fashanu's "disclosures" as "an affront to the black community" because "[p]ositive images of black people are still rare in British media":

The very person that gave the community so much hope has let his family and the community down with his tawdry revelations in a daily tabloid newspaper.

ibid.

The columnist Tony Sewell, condemned in that very issue's letters page for the previous week's article ("not the first time I've been unimpressed with his so-called journalism"), complained:

Why do gays make so much noise when they decide to come out? Last week butch soccer ace Justin Fashanu confessed, 'I am gay – and I want everyone to know it'. But why should we? We heteros are sick and tired of tortured queens playing hide and seek around their closets.

ibid.

(It doesn't seem to occur to Sewell that queens might be sick and tired of having to hide in order to avoid being tortured.) A short piece about Nigeria, "home country of [Justin Fashanu's] father Chief Patrick Fashanu", quoted a Nigerian

High Commission spokesperson: "In Nigeria, we treat homosexuals with utter contempt".

Gay readers of *The Voice* responded so vociferously to the way in which Justin Fashanu was attacked, that the following week saw an extraordinary volte-face:

We need to tackle the gay issue

...

Black people know only too well what it's like being treated as a second class citizen. Unfortunately, the experience of racism has not given us a greater degree of tolerance or understanding when it comes to accepting those who may be different from ourselves.

The treatment of gays and lesbians within our own community is proof of this.

The Voice (editorial), 6.11.1990.

Five letters protesting at the treatment of "a brilliant sportsman ... [who] has proven strength and courage in this world of homophobia" were printed alongside one rather less articulate letter from "J. Neal - A 'real' black man" (sic): "People like Fashanu should be ashamed of themselves." A major centre-piece article entitled "GLAD to be gay" described the first African Gay Pride march through Soweto and the coming out on television of twenty-six year old council worker Alex Olowade (photo inset of Olowade: a young man with dreads neatly tied back). As well as Olowade, it interviewed drag artist Miss Kimberley (photo inset looking sultry), housing manager Dennis Carrey and African-American Phil Wilson (photo inset looking clean-cut and earnest). Although no black lesbian women were interviewed, a plurality of identities was presented in a positive light.

This was the beginning of a long running campaign by Black Lesbians and Gays Against Media Homophobia, supported by NALGO among others. (In a key move, NALGO withdrew valuable advertising from *The Voice*.) Owing to the campaign, the volte-face edition of 6th November 1990 was followed by a front page apology by *The Voice* publisher Val McCalla and eventually institution of an editorial policy and code of practice ensuring fair coverage of gay issues and support for lesbian and gay employees (June 1991). The controversy within *The Voice* resulted in the dismissal and replacement of the editor.

The alternative discourse in the 1980s which had developed through separatist grass-roots organising and in the arts, had raised a plurality of identities who saw ourselves speaking from between spaces rather than from within communities like the black communities. We didn't mind acknowledging a fragmented status because we were beginning to think that the hegemonic identities (masculinity, whiteness, 'able' bodies) which pushed us outside the charmed social circle did so to hide their own fragmentary and contingent status. Fashanu's coming out was an iconic moment for a black lesbian and gay movement which had learned from black and feminist politics and had experienced a decade of autonomous organisation. *The Sun* – at the heart of New Right discourse – was beyond reach but *The Voice* was speaking the language of a black politics which had been inflected by a feminist understanding of plurality, and it could be addressed in that language. Just as racism can work to support homophobia, pluralist anti-racist discourse could be articulated to speak for gay rights.

The struggle for justice and a voice in *The Voice* – Justin Fashanu's own community newspaper; for the treatment of a brother with dignity, honouring the courage of his proud stand, seemed to have triumphed over bigotry and inhumanity. However, since it is in the nature of specific discourse to be temporary and local, this success was also temporary and local.

In April 1998, reports appeared in the tabloid press implicating Justin Fashanu in the rape of a 17 year-old football player on the team he was coaching in Maryland, USA. Fashanu was found dead 24 hours later in a lock-up garage in East London. In his suicide letter, he said:

Justice isn't always fair. Judging by the hysterical reports in the newspapers I was never going to be allowed a fair trial because of my homosexuality.

quoted in *The Voice*, 11.5.1998.

3.5 1990s.

The performance material I analyse developed in the period from the late 1980s, when Mercer suggests a plurality of identities was rising in the black communities, to the late 1990s. It is marked by a confidence in plurality which differentiates a focussed and vociferous protest at *The Voice*'s homophobia from silence and shame in the face of OWAAD members' homophobia. It is influenced by the rise of queer perspectives and a validation of butch/femme identities and sado-masochistic practice following the so-called "sex wars" in feminism (see Mercer, 1994, also Chapter Five). It also shows an apparently increasing disaffection from political action through groups, marches and community centres, although I will argue that political energy doesn't melt into apathy during this period, as some have feared.

My chronology (see Appendix I) shows that although 'organisations' dominate the late '70s and '80s, in 1990 there is a sudden change. Seven 'organisations' of significance to the black and gay community folded in 1990. 'Organisations' continued to be set up, particularly outside London, but there is an understanding in the community that the collapse of the Greater London Council and consequent cut-off in funding for 'minority' groups resulted in dispersion of collectivity:

[I]n the early 1980s, when we had the GLC in London and periods when there was an incredible amount of activity going on, I know what I was personally hoping for, was that through that kind of activity and our common interests I would be able to build networks of people I would be close to.

Mumtaz, quoted by Seniveratne in Mason-John, 1995, p.113.

At the launch of her most recent book²⁹, Valerie Mason-John said again that loss of GLC funding had resulted in a collapse of any black gay 'community' which might have existed.

My chronology offers some grounds for a more optimistic understanding. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and dove-tailed into the winding down of organisations, there appears to be an upsurge of cultural events focussed around

²⁹ At 1, Bernays Grove, Brixton, London, on 19.1.1999.

black gay creativity. In the 1990s, these were increasingly presented at mainstream venues and for mixed audiences³⁰. In 1985 the story of a relationship between a British Asian man and a National Front supporter, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (an independent production partly funded by Channel 4) was a surprise hit movie. In 1991, photographer Ajamu's work was presented at the Black Art Gallery; in 1994, Kobena Mercer's *Welcome to the Jungle* was published by the academic publishing house Routledge; in 1995, Toichi Nakata's film *Osaka Story* was shown on BBC2; and in 1998, Patience Agbabi's poetry was featured on Channel 4. In the 1990s, although black lesbian and bisexual women continue to go to black women's events (such as *In Celebration of My Sisters*), it is generally as a recognised but not necessarily visible contingent taking part, rather than as the hidden driving force behind the scenes.

This suggests that the collapse of black gay organisations was part of a much wider response from 'minority' communities to the loss of GLC funding and, I suggest, a reaction to the silencing of 'minority' interests in the political realm because of the successful hegemony of New Right discourse. At this time, the London Lesbian and Gay Centre was repossessed as a result of a financial scandal amidst a remarkable lack of interest in the gay communities. The sense of black gay collectivity didn't necessarily disappear, as Araba Mercer suggests:

There seemed to be so much more going on in the 1980s, everything was new, things were possible. There was so much dialogue and political theorising. Today there are just parties and literary events.

in Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993, p.53.

but shifted to express itself at "parties and literary events".

This shift is possibly also accompanied by a shift from 'exclusive' to 'focussed' events. Rather than 'black women only' events, organised and run by black women with anxious discourse generated around who might be defined 'black' or 'woman'³¹, we now see events such as *In Celebration of Our Sisters* –

³⁰ This was not always felt to be a desirable thing. Gilroy and Mercer differ over whether black British art had lost its way and was speaking only to a white audience, or was addressing a wider constituency. (Gilroy 1988, in Gilroy, 1993b, Mercer, 1994.)

³¹ Lesbian and gay organisations such as Shakti - the South Asian peer support group, Orientations - the Pacific Asian peer support group, and the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre

which includes out black lesbian performers but also black heterosexual male performers (performing pieces about women) and which is organised by Tony Fairweather of The Write Thing. Five years ago, it would have been unthinkable for a man to organise a women's event, let alone include men on the bill³². *Asia* at the Paradise Club (early 1990s) was a South Asian evening open to anyone. *Club Kali* at the Dome continues to advertise itself as "Open to all attitude-free connoisseurs"³³.

Another shift I have noted is in the artistic style of performances in 'minority' communities. In a paper given to the Pacific-Asia Cultural Studies Forum³⁴, I discussed a shift from autobiographical narratives. Through describing the 'real' life of e.g. a black gay man, these offer a sense of 'someone like me'. In the 1990s, work is based rather on the principle of the collage, drawing on many voices to give a fragmented but communal account of identification. In a performance like this, we as audience can locate ourselves in the spaces between the fragmented plural voices of collectivity (which Mercer writes about), rather than in the person of one similar individual, where we will never quite fit. This may be part of a shift from a liberal humanist politics of the individual seeking a community of (individual) peers for support to a postmodern collectivity in which membership of one group does not exclude membership of others, membership may be graded rather than absolute (i.e. I might at a particular moment in time be a clearly identifiable member of some groups, and *associated* with other groups) and membership may be based on sympathetic sensibilities rather than essentialist attributes: political understanding rather than

devoted many meetings and hours of discussion to creating careful lists of how many parents, grand-parents or great-grandparents from which countries of 'origin' were required to claim membership. In 1996, several issues of *The Pink Paper* featured correspondence debating on what basis 'women' could be defined (as entitled to use women-only space), following an article about Leicester Lesbian and Gay Centre's requesting a trans-gendered woman to leave their women-only night.

³² I have been told that there were some complaints about the men performers, but from white rather than black women.

³³ It should be borne in mind that the wider lesbian and gay clubbing scene has always been marked by incidents of racism.

³⁴ "Self and Other in Performed Narrative in the British Gay and Diaspora Communities." Goldsmiths College, November 1997.

dark skin, affinity as Chela Sandoval suggests (cited Haraway, 1985, in Haraway, 1991).

3.6 Conclusion

A his/herstory of a black and gay presence in Britain not only recovers a tradition for black and gay people from the conformism about to overpower it, but uncovers dynamic processes at the heart of British nationality. These processes can be understood through a combination of Bourdieu's concept of *doxa* and Derrida's supplementarity. (They could also be – somewhat differently – thought through in stricter Foucauldian terms.) They work not only through repudiation but by hiding some discursive mechanisms behind others.

Analysis of processes of identification in historical data shows that it is only as a complex that these can be understood. Thus, it is only in a meeting of racist and homophobic discourse which produces the symbolic outsider-figure of the black lesbian that we can fully understand a hegemonic New Right discourse. If we try to take what the New Right identify as dangerous queerness and black immigration separately, we may be drawn into the "argument":

queer vs. family

black vs. nation

and miss the hidden argument – the "universe of the undiscussed":

queer vs. straight

black vs. white

allowing white-ness and heterosexuality to establish themselves as self-evident, *a priori* and natural.

Those of us attempting to articulate our interests in the terms of hegemonic, dominant group discourse are "muted". We can only "speak" in terms which serve the dominant group interests. When Justin Fashanu tried to tell his story in a dominant group medium – *The Sun* newspaper – it was manipulated and rendered 'queer'. A small activist group succeeded in voicing outsider-figure interests in a community newspaper – *The Voice* (a partially outsider-figure space itself) – by utilising a rising pluralist discourse within which

the newspaper was situated. In my next chapter, I describe other ways in which those who are “muted” succeed in speaking out.

Chapter Four
Patience Agbabi – from “muted voice” to double-voiced discourse, disclosing the undiscussed

Bodies take metaphors seriously
 Pierre Bourdieu, cited Moore, 1994, p.71.

The poem by the performance poet Patience Agbabi *The Black The White and The Blue* operates a sophisticated deconstruction of Cartesian binaries. It is an example of a piece of work that questions the social institution of identity in performance rather than re-affirming collectivity as ritual. It discloses (some of) those relations of supplementarity which Bourdieu and Derrida argue are hidden in hegemonic discourse and which allow hegemony to appear to be ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ (as described in my his/herstory).

In my account of the poem I will utilise Edwin Ardener’s concept of “muted” voice, Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s adaptation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept “double-voiced discourse” and my own concept of analogic pairing to show how Agbabi voices a black gay constituency’s interests in spite of being “muted” in a hegemonic discourse. I will draw out ways in which the performance translates an incorporated knowledge of the politics and processes of identification for us, before moving in my next chapter to consider how academic theories of feminism handle these issues.

I will give a brief account of Agbabi’s life before my analysis of the poem. This biography will contextualise themes in the poem and will also describe some of the issues which a black gay artist faces in Britain.

I met Patience Agbabi sometime around 1992, so at the time I write we have been friends for nearly ten years. I have interviewed her many times and have published articles and reviews about her tour of South Africa (*Capital Gay*, 6.5.1994), about her first book *R.A.W.* (*Lesbian Review of Books*, Vol II, no. 2, Winter 1995-6) and about her work generally (in Mason-John (ed.), 1995). My interest in the poem I analyse here – *The Black The White and The Blue* – goes back several years. I have seen her perform the poem on many occasions, and

in many different venues from the television screen to a class on my Literature course for access students at Birkbeck College. In 1997, I gave a paper at the *Kicking Daffodils II* conference, Oxford Brookes University, offering an analysis of the poem. Agbabi was performing later that evening as part of the conference and together with other black women poets, she sat in on my presentation. I was asked how it felt to present my analysis with the poet in the room – most of the other scholars present worked with poetry written by people of several centuries ago, who can't question their critiques. I had always worked so closely with my participants that the situation had never seemed strange. In the end, I must take responsibility for the critical analysis which I offer, but I try to work with other intellectuals and writers, rather than on particular pieces. I think this has led to a richer understanding of the work.

4.1 Early Life

Patience Agbabi was born in London in 1965. Her parents are Ijaw, originally from Nigeria. She defines as Nigerian British. In the last couple of years she has defined as bisexual, having formerly defined as lesbian. In order that they could both continue working, Agbabi's parents placed her and her older brother with a foster family in North Wales – who are white English and working class; with whom Agbabi remains close. Her poem 'My Mother' (published in her first collection *R.A.W.*) vividly describes this situation:

My mother	married at 16
24	long time ago
where water	was unsafe
to drink	frozen solid
had chilblains	children
sang under coconut	chestnut
save yourself	they say
for a rainy day	be bold
chic	rouge on the cheek

from 'My Mother' in Agbabi, 1995.

This is no simple division of cultural influence into two black and white strands. In the poem, there are two columns but characteristics we associate with one mother may appear in either column, or spill over between the two (e.g. "where

water was unsafe/to drink frozen solid"). Sometimes it is unclear who is referred to. It isn't particular to white English or Ijaw culture to tell girls to save themselves for the special man or to wear make-up, although the poem does partly depend on our presumption that we can tell which mother is meant by which phrase. Playing with paired concepts and on the notion of a fixed binary to expose its artificiality was a strong characteristic of Agbabi's work in the early to mid '90s.

4.2 Oxford: enjoying a love of canonical poets and resisting the repression of performance.

It was Agbabi's father who encouraged her to apply for a place at Oxford University. In 1983 she went up to Pembroke College to read English Language and Literature. She was awarded an Exhibition for outstanding essays.

Her experience of Oxford was inevitably mixed. Diran Adebayo's novel *some kind of black* describes some of the pressures on a young black scholar at Oxford, and, speaking of her experience at Cambridge, Zadie Smith – the author of *White Teeth* – has described it as both: "Not always easy" and "I'm not embarrassed to say I had the time of my life here", (King's College newsletter, Spring 2000). Throughout her career Agbabi has expressed an appreciation of the dead white poets she studied at Oxford – the white and male dominated Canon which other black and lesbian poets attempt to get away from for political reasons. Her work shows the influence of tightly disciplined rhyme and rhythm schemes characteristic of Western European poetry. There are, of course, also many other influences on her work. In an article she wrote for *Africa World Review*, Agbabi says:

Not surprisingly, I am inspired by contemporary American rap music because much of it is close to the edge....

Rap music – and fashion – have had such far reaching effects in the African diaspora as well as on the Continent itself, not to mention its influence on white urban communities worldwide.

Agbabi, 1993, p.30.

The influence of the blues is also a strong one. A title such as *The Black The White and The Blue* is inflected by resonances from lines like 'What did I do

/To feel so black and blue'. As Gilroy remarks of musical forms, black cultural forms "fold back on themselves" in a celebration of survival and process of historical recovery (Gilroy, 1990, reprinted in Gilroy, 1993b).

While she was up at Oxford, a tutor told Agbabi she would never become anything other than a fourth rate poet. I don't know what his assessment was based on but a failure to understand the particularities of black cultural forms is so endemic in the British arts that they are often left to the social sciences for critical reading. Nor is Oxford famous for thorough critical insight into the contemporary popular culture that feeds into a grass roots poetry. Agbabi also remembers puzzlement at her suggestion that she might go to performances of Shakespeare rather than rely on the texts of his plays. Powerful pressure validated books and writing over oral and performance cultures. Of her own volition, Agbabi drew on the faculty library's collection of recordings of poetry (e.g. Richard Burton reading Dylan Thomas) rather than simply read work from the page.

During the days when rap dominated the music and poetry scene, Agbabi was often mis-called a rap poet, to her annoyance: "a tenth of my poems are raps so it doesn't describe my other pieces, that are inspired by other musical forms or by literary forms," (unpublished interview, September, 1995). Agbabi is live to the power of the written word:

It is ... pride in oral culture that sustains many performers in the African diaspora. At the same time, we are writers and we spend much time perfecting our craft. Rap artistes print their lyrics to doubly publish their words. In doing this they are making a political statement. They are saying, our words are important, if you did not catch them the first time then we will make sure you do the second.

Agbabi, 1993, pp.30-1.

I feel I'm in the middle of the literary and the oral traditions. People see them as two separate camps and I see myself as bridging the gap.

quoted in Pilgrim, in Mason-John (ed.), 1995, p.169.

Agbabi's work fits in Thiong'o's mode orature, interactively produced by literacy and orality.

Agbabi was always clear about the need to be established on both stage and page. She saw publishing her first book of poetry as a key event in her career but her approach to performance has been one of much greater respect than most poets. From the beginning, Agbabi has eschewed the practice of sitting or standing on a stage, reading from a book. She learns her poems and enacts them so that they are enjoyable in a different way whether read or seen.

It isn't possible to situate Agbabi's work in a British tradition of performance poetry, as there is no critical history of the performance tradition in British orature, even though this is a favourite mode of expression for women, the working classes, black peoples, survivors of the mental health system and many others with poor access to the middle class publishing world. Agbabi has remarked:

There's a danger of forgetting that poetry was an oral tradition and still is. That's why I have to perform as opposed to just publish.
quoted in Pilgrim, in Mason-John (ed.), 1995, p.169.

The current thriving performance poetry scenes in English cities such as London, Brighton and Bristol can't have sprung from nowhere, nor do I think they are a recent arrival courtesy of black rap and dub scenes although these have certainly had a vigorous influence on contemporary performed poetry.

Black performance poetry struggles against particular, racist assumptions. In the quote from my chapter, Agbabi went on to say:

Everywhere had an oral tradition. Because the African one is still happening it's seen more.
ibid.

Black (African) British performance poetry is often treated as if it comes direct and unsullied from schools of oral literature in Africa such as the tradition of the griots. (This is not to say that black British artists don't draw on African and Asian traditions but that they don't do so in a simplistic way.) In spite of the success of white performance poets such as John Hegley and black page poets such as Derek Walcott, there is still an impression that black poets are more attuned to the performance tradition for socio-cultural or racial-heritage reasons, rather than because black poets have less access to the white middle class

publishing world. Here we see at work the racist trap Gilroy refers to (Gilroy, 1988, in Gilroy 1993b), which places black people in a realm of feeling not thought.

Agbabi's work exemplifies the artificiality of the distinction between page and stage. She composes all her poetry on the page first. Some of the poems in *R.A.W.* enact a performance on the page, for example through her use of typefaces in *The Black The White and The Blue* to replicate newspaper headlines or graffiti. She isn't ashamed about drawing on a canon of white male writers – sometimes mockingly, as in her skit on sexism *Rappin It Up*, sometimes lovingly, as in her poem *The Wife of Bafa*. At the same time, it doesn't surprise me that Geoffrey Chaucer – who lived and wrote at a time when oral poetry was such a popular and influential art form, is a great favourite.

4.3 London: persuading poetry to pay for the rent.

When she graduated, Agbabi got a job as a technical design assistant for Marks and Spencer, based in London. Poetry is one of the most uncertain ways of earning a living – even with the advantages of whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality and an upper middle class background. In the article she wrote for *Africa World Review*, "Learning the Language", Agbabi says:

I have two jobs. In the day I work part-time freelance for a group of medical publishing companies. I input data, typeset, proofread and correct. At night I write or perform poetry...

Being a poet does not pay the rent but it pays for food.

Agbabi, 1993, p.30.

At the *Sweet Like Burfi* South Asian queer arts festival (Waterman Arts Centre, February 2000), the film-maker and cultural critic Pratibha Parmar spoke of the irony of her situation when she first became recognised: on the one hand she was pressured to do more for her 'community' and struggling fellow black and lesbian artists now that she was a 'success', on the other hand she was still struggling herself to survive by signing on the dole as unemployed.

It is important for artists to be recognised as artists rather than as their 'day job'. Given the linkage of the value of work to its financial success –

however absurd this may be in the difficult conditions of the arts today – it is politic for artists to hide any other means of support they have had to take up. It can therefore be difficult to represent the harsh economic reality of artists' lives while ensuring proper respect for their status as artists.

After many years of this kind of double working life, Agbabi does now succeed in making a living as a poet. Her first published book *R.A.W.* went into a second edition – most unusual for poetry. Her second book *Transformatrix* was published by Payback Press. She can now command high fees firstly as a performer in venues that may range from a pub back-room to the Royal Albert Hall, from the ICA to the BBC children's programme Blue Peter; secondly as a workshop co-ordinator in schools and on literature and arts courses. (A third aspect of her career is the number of honorary positions she holds or has held, such as member of the London Arts Board's Literature Advisory Board, or with the London-based performance poetry organisers Apples and Snakes.)

Agbabi's work is not strictly divided between performance and schools. She doesn't speak of her workshops in schools as solely a money-earning venture:

Poetry is still seen by many as an elitist pastime, a collector of dust on the top shelf of libraries. Poetry is not expected to address or be relevant to the masses. At a school in North West London, one student admitted that she expected me to be a white man in a suit. The workshop was my most successful.

Agbabi, 1993, p.30.

Just as the politics which drive her poetry are part of why she does workshops, so the grind of earning a living is part of her life as a performance poet:

It's Hell. Anyone who has any romantic notions about being a performance poet I need an agent! I spend about ten hours a week on the phone, I always come home in the evenings and have messages and they're often urgent. People assume that their gig is the only gig that you're doing. I hate having to negotiate fees.

Unpublished interview, September, 1995.

When she lived in shared houses, the telephone was a source of tension: important messages about work not being taken properly by her house-mates,

the amount of time she needed to use the phone. I remember her expressing relief at moving into a place of her own in terms of having a phone line that was all hers. Although she now has an agent, she still has to do much of her own administrative leg-work.

4.4 Politics

Agbabi's work is explicitly political. She draws on black politics, feminism and also on queer perspectives:

My work is often political and this provokes a divided reaction, especially from a Black audience. Some of them say 'Haven't you written about this issue yet?' and the others say 'We've heard it all before. Why can't we as Black people move on from political poetry?' Black writers who perform in Britain are under immense pressure to please everyone in the Black community. This of course is not possible. However, we do give each other a tremendous amount of support and I think we are reaching a stage where we realise our diversity and celebrate it rather than see it as a weakness, an Achilles heel, in the fight against racism.

Agbabi, 1993, p.30.

Kobena Mercer describes here the "burden of representation" borne by artists in marginalised situations:

the assumption that such artists speak as "representatives" of the communities from which they come – a role which not only creates a burden that is logically impossible for any one individual to bear, but which is also integral to the iron law of the stereotype that reinforces the view from the majority culture that every minority subject is, essentially, the same.

Mercer, 1994, p.214.

In line with the pluralization of identities which Mercer sees as coming from a black feminist movement (Mercer, 1994), Agbabi writes of refusing to carry the "burden of representation" and of celebrating instead diversity within the black community.

Much of her work comes from her commitment to political issues, which include those personally relevant to her own life and those in which she has a more impersonal interest. In a workshop on a course I was teaching at Birkbeck

College for access students, Agbabi talked about how she came to write *The Black The White and The Blue*:

I wrote it for a group called Newham Monitoring Group – it was their AGM. I think I'd performed at a previous AGM and they asked me back. I had about two months. I'd read the previous notes they'd given me and letters – I'm on their mailing list.

I wrote a first draft fairly quickly. There was a stage at which I thought I want to bring in the gay issue and I wasn't quite sure how to do it. Everyone's led down one path, they think it's going to be about racism.

February, 1997.

Her 1993 article speaks of political performance as impelled by the emotion of anger:

My poetry comes from anger at injustice in the world. Women in this culture are not expected to show anger and my poetry has surprised Black and white audiences alike who were perhaps expecting more humour. Although I enjoy performing I dislike the Black-and-White minstrel legacy we have had to endure. At one stage I deliberately withdrew humour from my set so that I would get taken seriously. I am not afraid to use profane language if it is appropriate to the theme and I do not ever want to whitewash my art.

Agbabi, 1993, p.30.

This quote describes the pressure of racist assumptions which obliges black poets to be political thinkers. Agbabi can be a hysterically funny poet:

I'm sitting on this toilet seat
I'm reading graffiti
and some of it's political
and some of it is cheeky
but I only see red
coz I'm feeling rather freaky
when it comes to having PMT
no woman can beat me

from 'Its Better Post- than Pre-' in Agbabi, 1995.

She can be funny, but Agbabi is aware of a denigrating legacy in the performance world that means if she gives way to her sense of fun, she may not be taken seriously. The quote also refers obliquely to the trick by which some people are associated with feeling rather than thought: black people or women. These feelings should of course only be those which can be tidily contained by

hegemonic discourse. It's acceptable to be funny and entertaining but women – especially black women – aren't supposed to get angry.

By virtue of her gay and feminine identity, and working at a time when black politics had been revisioned by feminism to consider multiple identities, Agbabi is more live than most to the importance of respect for diversity, even within the communities already marked as representing diversity in a homogenous lump. It is all too easy for people marked as 'black' (as different to 'white') to be assumed to be the same in all other ways. Those who are 'black' are rarely also perceived to be 'gay' – as if one could only be 'different' in one way. (Most of the time this is yet another barrier of prejudice to struggle through, but it can sometimes be used, e.g. to enable us to pass for 'straight' in situations where to be defined 'gay' would be dangerous.)

Agbabi is aware of yet another layer of 'difference'. In the early '90s, she was hissed at on stage at a women only night by a predominantly black lesbian audience for performing a piece celebrating S/M (sado-masochist) practices (the same audience cheered appreciatively at her other work and certainly felt a sense of 'sisterhood' for Agbabi in this context). S/M practices have long been the subject of argument in lesbian feminist discourse (see my discussion of the "sex wars", in my next Chapter). In the black gay communities there is an added twist to this argument, in that S/M may utilise chains and whips – associated with slavery, or regalia explicitly or implicitly referencing fascism and Nazi symbolism in particular. At the same time there is an argument asking us to acknowledge that S/M practices are enjoyed in the black gay communities (see Mason-John and also Bellos in Mason-John ed., 1995) and demanding tolerance for them on the grounds of sexual freedom.

One of Agbabi's poems "Sentences" is about domestic violence and women who kill their violent husbands.

And he comes home pissed from the pub one night
and he doesn't even speak
just beats her with his fists
and when she asks him why he has to fight
he says 'You're married to me for life'
then she knows that he knows that she spoke

to her solicitor on the phone the other night
from "Sentences" in Agbabi, 1995.

After performing "Sentences", about domestic violence, it's not rare for Agbabi to be approached by men who want to talk about it: "Some even say 'yeah, I used to beat up my girlfriend'. I just sit down with them. If they're willing to talk that's one step on from beating the shit out of her."

Agbabi read about several cases before she wrote "Sentences". "I haven't been through it myself," she says, "so I wanted to do a lot of research. After, I met Janet Gardner and Kiranjit Ahluwalia and they said 'you've got it' – so I felt validated. Some people say you shouldn't take other people's voices but as long as you're sensitive to the issue I think it's got to be said.

From interview by Lorna Russell, in *Everywoman*,
September, 1995.

In this account, Agbabi describes a feminist sensibility about experience: "I haven't been through it myself", "Some people say you shouldn't take other people's voices". However, with research and a perspective which is "sensitive to the issue", she feels this kind of work not only can, but should, be done. In addition, she is open to allowing the perpetrators of this violence a voice. This is not a free voice in which the perpetrators can encourage or excuse behaviour such as domestic violence but rather is part of a (slow) process moving them to an understanding of what they have done so that they will not continue such behaviour. I suggest that these two characteristics of the way in which Agbabi approaches the issue of domestic violence, are part of a 'queer' understanding. This allows for those who have not had 'experience' to speak on an issue with authority – provided they have done the hard work to come to an understanding of the issue which is analogous to the experience of going through it; secondly it allows for the dominant, even violently so, as well as the dominated/victimised, to come to an understanding of the situation and move on from it.

One of the liberatory aspects of a 'queer' perspective is that it allows heterosexuals as well as homosexuals to be queer and thereby breaks the monopoly of a subjective account established by standpoint feminism. The concept that a particular kind of experience leads to greater understanding broke the white patriarchal monopoly of a supposed objective and scientific point of

view, and allowed women and black people (for example) to speak with authority of our own experience. Queer allows for those who come from the experience of dominance to have an understanding which they can operate, escaping the Hegelian trap of the Master who can never perceive all sides of the situation and the Slave who can have complete understanding but no power.

4.5 Communities

Agbabi has always spoken with great warmth and appreciation of the arts scene and particularly the black performance poetry scene. Poets such as Ahmed Sheikh, Benjamin Zephaniah, Lemn Sissay and Merle Collins are cited throughout her career for their support and encouragement.

The performance poetry scene has an incredible amount of energy, I've made a lot of friends en route ... the arts in general, they've got a tradition of being liberal. A lot of straight promoters, like Apples and Snakes, would like to see more out gay performers.

When I first set foot on the circuit, a lot of older straight performers were incredibly supportive: Ahmed Sheikh, Merle Collins, Lemn Sissay, Benjamin Zephaniah. The sense of black performance community was very strong in the late 80s. It was like finding a family.

There's an incredible amount of support from black lesbians, I wouldn't say there's the same amount from white lesbians. The scene seems to attract – or perhaps I attract them! – more black lesbians as audience, perhaps because they come from cultures where poetry is more of a fun thing.

Unpublished interview, September, 1995.

Agbabi was speaking in the heyday of black women's poetry events when Word Up at Centerprise (in Hackney, London) and Sauda at the London Women's Centre were still part of a black lesbian scene. Nowadays audiences are more diverse, both in terms of race and of sexuality. Performing for a lesbian audience retains a special feeling, however. In a recent conversation, she said that she had agreed to appear at the Pride 2000 arts festival for a reduced fee because of the special atmosphere generated when you perform for your own.

Her experience supports my argument that black and gay people belong to a range of collectivities on the basis of affinity – sympathetic understanding, rather than to one 'community'. Here, Agbabi describes a black performance

scene as her community. In other situations she may feel belonging in a black lesbian rather than a white lesbian 'community', a lesbian 'community' or an S/M rather than radical lesbian feminist 'community'.

4.6 Performance

A performance by Agbabi is nothing like a poetry reading, where the poet might sit on stage reading from a book and perhaps answer questions afterwards. Imagine a room, or a theatre, dark except for a spot-lit bare stage area. If this is Apples and Snakes at the Battersea Arts Centre we will be in the café downstairs, with the chairs all turned to the small raised stage in the corner. Behind us they may still be serving food and drinks at the long counter. The till may ching softly behind the performance in the velvety dark. It won't distract us. Or perhaps this is the huge theatre space of somewhere like the Hackney Empire on an International Women's Day event. We have met lots of women we know, briefly chatted, exchanged the gossip. The plush seats will be in darkness, the bar at the back dimly lit, the big stage brightly lit. It will take quite a person to fill that big bare stage.

Patience Agbabi delivers her poems with the power and conviction that bring poetry readings to life; her voice dealing out the words with rhythm and emotion, her thin, dark frame a compelling presence on stage.

Anita Naoko Pilgrim, *Capital Gay* (6.5.1994).

Agbabi, who looks like Titania's sidekick in Doc Martins, is terribly "PC", even if she is often right.

Glynis O'Hannor, *The Star* (Johannesberg), 1994.

she was performing, acting things out, moving around, shouting, then whispering. The room was buzzing and the audience loved it.

Bridgit Frost in *Writers' Monthly* (1991).

Overleaf –

The Black The White and The Blue (in Agbabi, 1995, reproduced by artist's permission).

The Black The White and The Blue

He's an East End Lad East End Ed
East End born East End bred
see his muscles have a feel
Made in England made of steel
East End lad East End lad
square jaw gift of the gab
packs a punch to find a clue
see his victims black and blue

Black man Asian man
flew from the East to East Ham
sun don't rise in East End cell
where Bangladesh meets English hell
hate mail dog crap
midnight petrol bomb attack
sticks and stones and **PAKI GO HOME**
make his street a no go zone

When Asian man dials 999
covered in blood of racist crime
police arrive police arrest
the Asian man and kick his chest
and 666 the beast walks free
and **THE SUN** won't print what **THE SUN** won't see
BOYS IN BLUE BEAT BLACK MAN
cos Blue protects Blue whenever Blue can

PC White adds a stripe to his arm
the man suffers grievous bodily harm
they try to charge him for assault
'We had to restrain him it's all his fault'
PC Edward White just an East End lad
with a chip on his shoulder of which he's proud
gotta be a hard nut come what may
so no-one will ever guess that he's gay

East End lad West End fag
same man different drag
West End fag West End fag
remembers the words of his East End dad
'This country's gone downhill over the years
and d'ya know why?' 'Why dad?' 'Niggers and queers.
Bring back hanging that's what I say...'
you could walk the streets without fear in my day...'

West End Eddie enters the club
looking attractive looking for love
his eye lashes lowered his eye lingers long
on the man in the corner muscular bronze
At dawn when they leave it's erogenous zones
they have on their minds not the sticks and the stones
of the gang that attack not the stainless steel
of their knives 'You queer bastards how does this feel?'

East End lad went up West
now oppressor now oppressed
couldn't see in light of club
his big bronze man had Asian blood
East End blood on West End street
what will he say to his friends on the beat?
He can paint the town red but at dawn he'll pay
with a scar on his body that says 'I'm gay'

West End fag West End fag
stabbed in the back by an East End lad
son of a racist left him for dead
boy in blue is covered in red
Black man Asian man
kisses his lips and holds his hand
NIGGER PAKI QUEER
when will we walk the streets without fear?

4.7 *The Black The White and The Blue.*

In a live performance of *The Black The White and The Blue*, Agbabi's body is immediately significant to us as audience because it is presented to us in the flesh. The subject matter of the poem also raises questions of corporeal identity: a black woman enacts a white man, scenes of violence and of sex are described. Clothes are not explicitly referred to. PC White adds a stripe to his 'arm' when you would expect 'sleeve' (it's true that 'arm' rhymes with 'harm' but this is not of course going to be the only reason for using the word). When he goes into the West End gay bars PC White is not described as wearing leathers, jeans or chinos:

East End lad West End fag
same man different drag

We vaguely imagine how the East End lad's uniform ('BOYS IN BLUE') must differ from the outfits of the West End fag but what Agbabi actually describes is body language to convey the two sides to the man:

see his muscles have a feel
Made in England made of steel
East End lad East End lad
square jaw gift of the gab

his eye lashes lowered his eye lingers long

At the end of the poem, PC White is left:

with a scar on his body that says 'I'm gay'

Wispy, put-on/take-off, manipulable markers of identity (which in a Goffman style approach we might think of as performance) such as clothes disappear into identification which belongs to our bodies: ways of standing or looking, abuses and sufferings of physical violence, scars.

Agbabi does not, however, use obvious symbols of body identification; I mean particularly skin colour. The Asian man in the club is not recognisable in the dim light as anything but muscular and bronze, we have to be told he is Asian. The line:

BOYS IN BLUE BEAT BLACK MAN

with its balanced pairing of blue uniform to black skin, is a newspaper headline, an indirect reference¹. Agbabi does not say “PC White is a white man” or “he had pinko-grey skin”. She places both him and his Bangladeshi victim using slang phrases and words and geographical references of places through/from/to which the two people move. It is as if she decodes and repeats for us a geographical history laid into the body² which produces a racial identity. This supports arguments which see race as a produced identification process rather than a concrete material identity fixed in physiognomy - the “color, hair and bone” which Du Bois set aside, preferring to think about race in terms of forces that divide us into groups (cited, Appiah, 1986).

At first, casual reading, the idea of a fixed concrete race and sex/gender seems to be disrupted: a black woman successfully acts out a white man, using body stance – clenched fists, head thrust up and jaw forward, tense muscles – and a cockney accent, but not white body paint. Actually, we recognise the white male persona being performed, but we also see clearly that it is a black woman who is performing. We can look at these perceptions through Butler’s point about the misunderstanding of ‘gender as performative’:

if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night.

Butler, 1993, p.x.

PC White is a performed gender, a role in a dramatic performance who can be fetched out, put on and then put away again. Patience Agbabi is gender as performative, she can’t dispose of her gender or slip easily into another one.

It would appear that this dabbling in cross-gender performance serves to re-assure us. It’s possible to mimic gender other than one’s own in a recognisable fashion *but the ‘real’ sex of the mimic is always there underneath* – a material fact as obvious as Althusser’s paving-stone or rifle. Sex is reassuringly definite, concrete, biological. Spectators of Indonesian transvestite

¹ Double-voiced discourse.

² I am indebted to Les Back for this insight.

plays take pleasure in telling each other “He’s really a man”; in recognising the ‘real’ sex under the performed gender (Peacock, 1987). We experience a pleasurable reassurance when we recognise the ‘real’ blackness and womanhood under the performance of white masculinity.

This is not the whole story. Regarding race: under the surface reassurance that black is not white, we have accepted Nigerian British as a coherent identity when with our surface minds we might call it impossible to be both. In our material, concrete vision, Patience Agbabi is visibly Ijaw but she is turning out a cockney accent and showing a knowledge of London only a Londoner could achieve. We have also accepted a shifting flux of accent, body language, geographical references, job as better depictions of PC White’s whiteness than the bald statement “he is white” or “his skin is the shade known in the paint trade as off white”, or than wearing white body paint. We have accepted that a racist in a nightclub might not recognise the Asian blood in bronzed skin as anything except sexy, and that therefore it is absurd for him to spill Asian blood in pretending to restrain someone simply because the bronzed skin has on that occasion been defined Asian more clearly by some external factor. We have accepted that it was the context and the occasion, rather than skin of a particular definite, concrete, biological shade which resulted in racist attack on one occasion and seduction on another. We have accepted a complex intertwining of race, sex/gender and sexuality rather than blocks of identity. Masculinity, whiteness and homosexuality have become entwined in such a way that at least one worrying aspect of the relationship between masculinity and heterosexuality has been exposed:

gotta be a hard nut come what may
so no-one will ever guess that he’s gay

For Althusser matter exists in different modalities; the material existence of ideology doesn’t have the same modality as a paving-stone or a rifle. Butler uses this argument to suggest that the material modality of paving-stones is no more ‘real’ than that of ideology. There are governmental principles which assert a difference not between paving-stones and rifles but between the paving-stone

of the pavement and the paving-stone of the road, and these can sometimes be *materially* more important (see Butler, 1993). In *The Black The White and The Blue*, we can begin to see how insignificant any concrete, biological body part of particular shade or shape is. Firstly in comparison to the shifting flux of material like stance, accent, walk, pitch of voice, turn of head, sharp or languid arm movement, geographical knowledge, family stories, career path, walking in particular ways if caught out alone at night. Secondly in comparison to how these are read in different contexts.

An illusion of concrete sex/gender and race and of definite fixed sexuality is produced by many tiny constant interleavings. Skin colour or breast size are used here as signs³ of race and sex/gender, as arbitrary and empty as the signifiers which designate them, and therefore open not only to being filled with meanings such as black, white; African, Asian, European; male, female but also intelligent, sensual, evil, domestic, inscrutable, weak, maternal, dirty. Context is crucial. PC White reads the Asian body as repulsive in the East End, desirable in the West End. His lingering gaze elicits love in a gay club, hatred in the street outside. The triumph of turning the terms 'black' and 'queer' into the affirmative comes from the recognition that these are arbitrary, in the Saussurean sense, and can be filled with new meaning, e.g. black is beautiful, while still carrying a history of their previous negative and oppressive meaning. They can fully occupy an ambiguous position, rather than attempt to refute the already established stigmatising hegemonic reading.

4.8 "Muted voices"

In *The Black The White and The Blue* only dominant figures use direct speech. The police say:

We had to restrain him it's all his fault

but once the policeman persona PC White is revealed as gay and "now oppressed", he only uses body language. Speech is a medium open to his racist

³ In Turner's Jungian definition of the sign as an "analogous or abbreviated expression of a known thing" (Turner, 1967, p.26).

and homophobic dad (briefly to PC White but only in a flashback to himself as a child, I think the argument is sustained) and to queer-bashers:

‘You queer bastards how does this feel?’

In addition, Agbabi’s own, personal voice is “muted”. She doesn’t speak here of racism and homophobia as a British Nigerian lesbian woman but through white and Asian men enacting discourse of race and sexuality.

Hidden in the masculine discourse she operates, Agbabi manages to smuggle an issue of particular concern to women into the poem. Safety on the street has been marked out by feminist marches to ‘take back the street’ from rapists and kerb-crawlers⁴, although it is also important to those who are defined black and gay. Agbabi raises the issue not in her own voice – as a feminist woman, but through the voice of PC White’s dad, someone who – as a white straight man, is probably safest of all people in the street:

You could walk the street without fear in my day.

At the end of the poem, Agbabi reclaims this political objective for those for whom racism and homophobia such as that expressed by PC White’s dad have made the street “a no go zone”. She articulates her politics through the particular kind of irony which Bakhtin called ‘double-voiced discourse’.

4.9 Double consciousness, double vision and double-voiced discourse.

We have learnt the english language the hard way - too many of us have been silenced en route, and we have now reached a stage in history when we own it. We can articulate our own disparate, ‘diasporate,’ view of the world in our own words as the Great Oral and literary traditions make an alliance in popular culture.

Agbabi, 1993, p.31.

Each social group in each historical period has its own individual perception of the word, its own range of verbal possibilities When one does not have one’s own proper “ultimate word,” any creative intention, any thought, feeling or experience must be refracted through the medium of another speech act, another style, another manner, with which it cannot immediately merge without

⁴ This campaign was one in which feminist clashed with race politics, when it was pointed out that calling for increased policing of men in the street would lead to an increase in police harassment of black men.

reservation, distance, refraction If there is no ... medium [of refraction], then vari-directional, double-voiced discourse will hold sway.

Mikhail Bahktin, 1929, p195.

As I remarked in my account of her life, at the time Agbabi was writing *The Black The White and The Blue*, pairs, binaries, twos of all kinds were a strong theme in her work. As Mercer argues, this was a time when black cultural politics was demanding acknowledgement of plurality, asserting difference not identity.

In the paper I gave at Oxford Brookes about *The Black The White and The Blue*, I discussed Agbabi's playing with binaries as 'analogic pairing'. By this, I meant not only to draw attention to the strong theme of binaries: eight verses set out four on each facing page; pairs of concepts: Black man/Asian man (l.9 and l.61), East/East Ham (l.10), Boys in Blue/Black Man (l.23), East End lad/West End fag (l.23), a no go zone/erogenous zones (l.16 and l.45), niggers/queers (l.38). I wanted also to suggest that these pairs are an analogy of the binaries which underpin our society: black/white, East/West, gay/straight (nature/culture, body/mind). The pairs are so rigidly formalised in the poem that their artifice is obvious. This suggests that the binaries underpinning them, those underpinning our society, are also artificial. The supplementary relations between them are being forced out of hiding and some of the universe of the undiscussed is disclosed: "Made in England" racism and homophobia producing whiteness and heterosexuality. Here we could examine again the title of the poem, in which the relations of black and white are shown to be underpinned by a third term, that representative of the state: the blue of the police force⁵.

In this analysis performance can be seen to work in the opposite direction to journalism. Where not only *The Sun* and the *Financial Times* but also the *New Statesman* and *The Guardian* were drawn into New Right hegemonic discourse, and replicated the repudiation of black and queer as Outsider-figures which is implicit in the constitution of (white) nation and (straight) family, *The Black The*

⁵ Agbabi was influenced by punk as well as rap and the blues. See Gilroy, 1987, on how Rock Against Racism and (some) punk music identified certain state institutions, and especially the police force, with racism.

White and The Blue showed up these dynamics of power. This isn't because of the technique utilised. The *Financial Times* article on Linda Bellos which I cite in Chapter Three uses an ironic double-voiced discourse, reading her statement through the FT "manner", as Bakhtin calls it. Performance can be made to work for neo-conservative interests (as Phelan has shown, Phelan 1993) but here Agbabi chooses to utilise its deconstructive potential to mobilise a radical political understanding.

Agbabi's writing fits within what Henry Louis Gates Jr. identified as a specifically black diasporic literary tradition (Gates 1988). Gates drew on Bakhtin's concept of double-voiced discourse to describe the way in which African-American writers work. Bakhtin describes double-voiced discourse as a parodic form of expression aimed simultaneously at the regular referential object of speech and a second context of discourse. That is to say, the discourse operates on two levels, as when an author writes in the voice of a character with whom s/he does not empathise, s/he conveys the actual drift of the character's speech and simultaneously provides an ironic reading of it. For Gates, the black oral street practice of Signifyin(g) is a Bakhtinian double-voiced discourse and offers us a critical tool which comes from the black tradition itself, although Gates doesn't go on to read the concept of double-voiced discourse through the work of African-American scholars and writers W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright. (Gates talks about Wright's fictional work as material for his own theoretical analysis rather than Wright's theoretical work as a contribution to an analytic frame.)

Drawing on Hegel, Du Bois developed a concept describing the way black people perceive the world through the oppression of racism, which he called "double consciousness":

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self

through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

W.E.B. Du Bois, cited in Gilroy, 1993a, p.134.

Wright separately developed a concept from Nietzsche's "frog's perspective" which he called "double vision":

The black man's is a strange situation; it is a perspective, an angle of vision held by oppressed people; it is an outlook of people looking upward from below. It is what Nietzsche once called a 'frog's perspective.'

Richard Wright, cited in Gilroy, 1993a, p.160..

"Double-voiced" parody for Gates is exemplified in the practice of Signifyin(g). Gates defines Signifyin(g) as a black disruption of the white concept of signifying. White language signifies, black languages Signifies on the meaning of white English, turning 'wicked', for example, into a compliment. Gates argues that since the mid-eighteenth century white thinkers such as Hume, Kant and Jefferson have been accusing black writers of mimicking white thought, hence the concern to be original in black thinking and even to refuse to acknowledge any possible influences. However black writers have been engaged not in mimicking but in parodying white thought in Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse. Gates cites Zora Neale Hurston's essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression": "originality is the modification of ideas", even Shakespeare "reinterprets". He also cites Richard Wright's essay "How Bigger Was Born", in which Wright says not only did he listen to white writers, "I read their novels ... I took these techniques ... and twisted them, bent them, adapted them" (cited in Gates, 1988, p.118). Agbabi's skit *Rappin It Up* is a classic example of Signifyin(g), in which she bends quotations to her purposes in her description of being sexually harassed by figures from the white literary canon such as Wordsworth:

He said

'Funny you should say that.
Fancy a quick one?
Write a bit myself ya know
get yer lips round this one
I wandered lonely as a cloud
So I drank down my drink
and I said it out aloud

'I walked on my own
 from the Underground station
 listenin to the beauty
 of my own imagination'
 from *Rappin It Up*, in Agbabi, 1995.

In *The Black The White and The Blue* – as a black woman poet speaking in the voice of a white policeman – Agbabi is utilising Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse. She thereby gets a "frog's perspective" up on the white State, showing it in harsh, crude imagery as the violent racist policeman PC Edward White and the tabloid journal *The Sun*. She also gets a refracted perspective on black lives – refracted through white racist eyes (Du Bois's "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others"). Bangladeshi victim, exotic bronzed love-god, these unappealing roles for black men are shown to us as PC White sees them. In imitating the cockney voice of "East End Ed", Agbabi Signifies on it, exposing its hard man vocabulary and phraseology to us in unsympathetic light. Not as crude as mimicry or direct parody, this lays bare to us PC White's bullish, bullying soul:

gotta be a hard nut come what may
 so no-one will ever guess that he's gay

In the middle of the poem, bifurcating the eight verses, the central analogy becomes apparent. Blackness is to gayness as racism is to homophobia. Entwining race and sexuality in male bodies, Agbabi presents this analogy to us in such a way that we understand it as a complex rather than a set of simple identity blocks: black and white; gay and straight; female and male. It is striking that Agbabi avoids the more common analogy: blackness is to womanhood as anti-racism is to feminism. Even more so that what she presents is a complex of identity based on oppressive practices. Hegemonic whiteness is produced by racism and combined with the heterodox gay identity repudiated by heterosexuality. Through this combination of positions of the powerful and the disempowered, Agbabi makes us see that privileges we enjoy in one place may depend on the sort of violence practiced on us by the privileged in another.

Agbabi can lay claim to the Hegelian Slave's viewpoint: looking up from below, but here she attempts to shift responsibility for looking around and

understanding what is happening onto the Masters' viewpoints. Within the feminist perspectives of the poem, this is only possible through direct experience of suffering. Only through an analogous experience of homophobic abuse can the racist policeman understand racism.

The Black The White and The Blue offers us an account of how discourse which relies on the repudiation of an Outsider-figure⁶ is complicated and cross-cut by. The poem reveals processes of racism and homophobia via a form of irony which can be understood partly in terms of Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic. It attempts to put into gear a political strategy which can also be understood in terms of Hegel's dialectic – a feminist standpoint epistemology. Feminist standpoint epistemology argues that better knowledge (or epistemology) can be gained in a situation of oppression, from that standpoint. *The Black The White and The Blue* suggests that the insight gained by the oppressed in one situation should be applied to other situations where we are oppressors, in order to achieve understanding and political movement.

A particular form of irony is used in *The Black The White and The Blue* to escape a situation of political disempowerment, of "muted"ness. Double-voiced discourse doesn't only allow the "muted" to speak about their situation of oppression, it exposes the terms in which that oppression is established. Thus, in Agbabi's poem, the racist policeman's father says:

'This country's gone downhill over the years
and d'you know why?' 'Why dad?' 'Niggers and queers.'

The two Outsider-figures 'niggers' and 'queers' are set up to be repudiated in order not only to convey the idea of a former white heterosexual haven (Back (1996) calls similar accounts Golden Age discourse) but to constitute 'this country' as a coherent and *a priori* concept, in a classic playing out of the New Right discourse.

PC White's father is the figure we think of as the natural audience of Powellism: white, heterosexual, working-class and male. Agbabi's poem attempts to re-modulate a racist way of life by putting it through the experience of

⁶ I capitalise the 'O' of Derrida's "outsider figure" to suggest Lacan's Other.

homosexuality. Like the struggle between *The Voice* and Black Lesbians And Gays Against Media Homophobia over the representation of Justin Fashanu, this creates a space in which a politics of sexuality can be articulated through the terms of a politics of race.

4.10 Conclusion

Patience Agbabi is situated in the interface Gilroy speaks of between black cultural practices and black political aspirations. Drawing on a range of influences including poets from a canon Leavis would have approved of, rap music and other black musics, a British performance tradition, she describes a politics of plurality, working with 'issues' that are not personal to her (like domestic violence) as well as those of race and gender politics and gay sexuality.

Her performances succeed in representing an ironic commentary on the Cartesian binary and what could be called a postmodern feminist understanding of the materiality of sex/gender. Her representation of race has the same approach to materiality. She uses what Gates sees as a specifically black literary form to overcome being "muted" (Ardener) in hegemonic discourse.

The Black The White and The Blue deconstructs and discloses the workings of hegemonic discourse. It is restricted from further movement by its adherence to a particular feminist philosophy: feminist standpoint epistemology. The possibility that PC White will fundamentally change his racist practices because of an understanding gained through experience of homophobia is a small one. In my next chapter, I will look at how different academic theories of feminism tried to incorporate questions of race. I will explore a shift to queer theory in feminism – comparable to Agbabi's shift to a queer perspective in work like the poem "Sentences" – in the search for a means to do what Agbabi makes so clear needs to be done.

Chapter Five Multiple Identities

Patience Agbabi's work is situated at particular moments in the development of feminist philosophies. *The Black The White and The Blue* articulates a political philosophy from feminist standpoint epistemology and concepts which can be understood in postmodern feminism; *Sentences* draws on a political philosophy expressed in queer activism.¹ Kobena Mercer has suggested that it was in the wake of feminist critique of a monolithic masculinist black politics that a plurality of identities began to assert a presence in black communities in Britain (Mercer, 1994). Queer theory developed as a feminist school of thought. Following my analysis of how a black and gay performance handles race, gender and sexuality politics, in this chapter I examine academic feminist approaches which discuss questions of race as well as gender politics. I do so on the basis that they are 'data' theorising the politics and processes of identification, in the same way that black and gay performance is 'data' seeking to translate incorporated knowledge about identification.

As with my accounts of black and gay performance, I sometimes find it useful to contextualise the work I examine in an account of its disciplinary background (in its personal history or biography, as it were). Some of the academic feminists I draw on are white and appear to be at high risk of falling into inadvertent racism. However, recent work uses a new kind of distancing, constituted on different principles to the old scientific objectivity, which allows other perspectives than black feminist standpoint epistemology to address issues of race. I discover that this work is managed in a similar way to performance work that succeeds in representing multiple identities and I situate it in the feminist school of thought 'queer theory'.

After a brief account of de Beauvoir's thinking, I will move to an analysis of how institutional racism can limit feminist thinking in social anthropology. This allows me to explore the 'objective' distancing utilised in

¹ I don't mean that Agbabi consciously studied these schools of thought and produced work along these lines but that these were the political epistemologies current at the time she was writing and which came through in her poems.

classic anthropological studies (which I hope to revise and recover). I next look at accounts produced when the authors fell into the prejudiced discourse they were actively seeking to dismantle. I return to standpoint epistemologies to see how they manage analysis of what Butler calls “the complexities of contemporary power” and then show how a shift from standpoint epistemology to queer theory may enable all of us to do so.

In the final section of the chapter, I draw on accounts in black and gay performance to interrogate the categories drag, butch and femme. These categories have been important to feminist thinking in the de-stabilising of fixed categories of gender. However, they are in danger of being reified: firstly in Butler’s claim that a category of butch is inherently subversive and secondly because feminist accounts have recently referred to drag practice citing only one film as an example. I offer various accounts of drag, and of performance considering butch, femme and drag experience to re-establish drag, butch and femme as diverse personal experience in black and gay communities rather than conceptual identities against which gender theory can be measured.

Feminism remains troubled by the possibility of an essentialist claim to speak for all women and the question, how can we incorporate into one agenda women of all races, classes, sexualities, while respecting the differences of races, classes and sexualities. Movements for equal rights in black communities, more localised, have taken different strategies towards other Others. The Black Power movement in the States and some stages of anti-racist politics in Britain ignored or disparaged feminism (and have sometimes ‘accused’ feminists of being lesbian, thereby degrading two other Othernesses at once) or have asked women to work for black rights first, promising that equal rights for women will be taken up once these have been achieved. The post-apartheid ANC government in South Africa has included not only women’s but lesbian and gay rights in the constitution, so that from being the most conservative, South Africa has suddenly become the most liberal state in the world (this doesn’t mean greater actual tolerance on the ground). Lesbian communities in the Anglo-American sphere have perhaps

been most inclusive of other “muted” groups². The scarifying earlier experience of the feminist movement, realising it had excluded black women and working-class women³ by failing to engage with a more diverse politics has been carved into the lesbian political conscience. White able-bodied thin lesbian organisers commonly admit they don’t – or can’t – fully understand the experience of racism, ableism, politics of size. In place of understanding, they offer respect for subjective accounts of such experience and make great efforts to include subjective accounts without claiming to understand them. They make tentative, if any, critical judgement on accounts of other oppressions based in subjective experience for fear of inadvertently imposing a prejudiced perspective. This standpoint epistemology approach, as we might call it, creates a freer if less critically supportive realm within which black, disabled and fat lesbians can develop work. Partial autonomous representation for black and gay people in anthologies and festivals such as Gay Pride has been achieved on this basis.

In the academy, studies of identity/identification have tended to be compartmentalised: race studies (Hall, Gilroy), gender studies (Seidler, Segal), lesbian and gay studies (Weeks, Plummer, Dollimore, Munt). A vast amount of work has been made possible in this way but efforts are now being made to move beyond the compartments towards an understanding of how processes of identification work together (Butler, Brah, Back, Skeggs). Feminism has been working towards this project for at least two decades.

Feminist scholars have been very open about efforts and failures to incorporate analysis of race in particular (feminist critiques of second-wave feminism, Haraway, Butler)⁴. In addition, feminist gender studies offer particular examples of succeeding in the incorporation of the analysis of race (and class) through the use of personal standpoint (e.g. Williams, hooks) and feminist studies of sex/gender systems have developed a successful line of thought contextualising sex/gender in sexuality (Rich, Rubin, Wittig, Butler).

² White gay male communities have been more sluggish in their response to diversity within their ranks. Unlike lesbian women or black gay men they are not responding to being different in a community already marked out as different.

³ I.e. the large majority of women.

⁴ Class and sexuality have not been as seriously addressed by feminism until recently. (Dis)ability remains under-theorised.

As Ardener has suggested (Ardener, 1975, see also Moore, 1994, Skeggs, 1997), the position of women academics is a curious one: at once theorising subject formation and struggling to position ourselves as subjects. This means that a clear understanding of the subject in positions of power and disempowerment is methodologically as well as theoretically crucial to the different schools of feminism.

Feminist critiques of the 'natural' as well the 'social' sciences have shown it is not possible to take a completely objective approach in analysis and black thinkers have shown that to refuse to think the analysis of sex/gender and sexuality through race, is not to produce an innocent neutral analysis but a white one. Objectivity has been redefined to include the partial perspective from subjective experience of oppression and renamed strong objectivity. (See Harding, 1986.) Some of the best analyses of sex/gender and sexuality through race have drawn on the conscious use of subjective perspectives, particularly in black feminist standpoint epistemology. Because the 'partiality' of these perspectives is already visible, they offer a rigorous reflexivity as opposed to a hidden agenda which may secretly distort analysis. However, if this is the only way to approach the understanding of racialisation in gender studies we will be severely limited in the struggle for an egalitarian politics: a depressing prospect for sociology or hopes for a fully integrated society. There do appear to be serious difficulties in top-downwards understanding of identities rooted in power dynamics, as I will show below, but the arguments of queer theory and activism may offer a way through.

Comparisons of race and sex/gender have existed from the earliest second-wave feminist text: de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*. This supports my argument that the politics of race and sex/gender are fundamentally intertwined, as Patience Agbabi's work shows. However, the incorporation of awareness of issues of race and racism into feminism has been confounded by a whole range of problems.

5.1 “All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men but Some of Us are Brave.” (Hull, Scott and Smith, 1982).

de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* has been criticised for comparing the situation of women to that of American Negroes (sic) on the grounds that this comparison assumes all women are white and all African-Americans male, causing black women to vanish from her text. Secondly, the comparison may take over, in effect colonise, the experience of racial oppression and in particular American slavery, as merely symbolic of sexism.

What de Beauvoir actually said, was:

il y a de profondes analogies entre la situation des femmes et celle des Noirs⁵

de Beauvoir, 1949, pp.24-5,

a statement which might be taken to respect the particularities of sexism and racism while showing how the strategies they use intersect. To say there are analogies between the situation of women and that of black people is not to say their situations are the same. de Beauvoir goes on to discuss how both women and "Blacks" are "kept in their place", a place chosen for them, by processes of infantilisation and the construction of ideal figures towards which to aspire: « [le] Noir résigné, ... la femme « vraiment femme » »⁶ (*ibid.*). (Compare Gilroy's good black entrepreneur and Smith's good closetted homosexual discussed in Chapter Three.) The black woman *per se* does not appear here but the comparison of identities and processes through which racism and sexism are constituted or articulated is successful in a limited way, suggesting how ideal figures can work in her life as much as in the black man's or the white woman's. It is important to represent a multiplicity of identities, as Mercer suggests, not collapse people into categories: women, "Blacks", nor must the comparison of political situations such as the oppression of women and of black people be allowed to degenerate into a homogenisation of oppressions.

de Beauvoir's work offers a rich ambiguity. Both in itself and in critiques of it, it provokes useful thought about the intersection of race and gender politics.

⁵ "there are profound analogies between the situation of women and that of Blacks".

⁶ "the resigned Black, the 'truly womanly' woman".

5.2 Institutional racism in the academy.

In some areas of work, an institutional racism may be almost impossible to escape. The confluence of feminisms and social anthropology has been more important to gender studies than is generally realised. Many crucial feminist thinkers have come from the discipline (e.g. Gayle Rubin, Marilyn Strathern) and the anthropological study by Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger* has been important in unexpected areas, including the work of Judith Butler. Feminisms have influenced whether and how women are represented in social anthropology as part of a general shift in the discipline towards the validation of “subaltern” (Gayatri Spivak’s phrase) identities and histories, and project participants’ interpretations of their own cultures. As well as cross-cultural data on the cultural specificities of sex/gender politics social anthropology has provided a particular sphere within which a rich symbiosis has developed between feminist arguments, the theory of anthropology and the writing of ethnographies. This richness of material is covered but not explicitly drawn out in Henrietta Moore’s *Feminism and Anthropology*.

Moore says throughout the book that race and class ought to be part of feminist analysis in social anthropology. Class is better provided for than race, for example in the citing of Janet Bujra’s work. The question of race and racism is one which threatens to expose some very shaky foundations to the discipline.

Moore gives an acute account of social anthropology’s situation in regard to issues of race (Moore, 1988, p.193), arguing that the discipline heard critique of its colonial past rather as part of a discourse about ethnocentrism than one about racism. Moore herself doesn’t put into question the inherent racism of the basis to the classic form of anthropological ethnography: that a (white) stranger is conscious of social facts which ‘indigenous’ peoples take for granted. This is a complex (structuralist) idea which assumes that ignorance/innocence of another culture and consequent childish questions may expose for analysis a deeper level of social structure than participants themselves are aware of. This assumption obscures the more fundamental (Eurocentric) assumption that it is only the superior

epistemology of Western scientific training which can lead the anthropologist to that child-like state of clear-sighted ignorance/innocence. Moore has an incisive analysis of the tensions inherent in the role woman-ethnographer, and the patriarchal and colonial character of the anthropological mode of writing ("Master Narratives" in Moore, 1994), but she doesn't tackle the anthropological method. Here I will critique ethnography as method, through the concept 'indigenous anthropology'.

An 'indigenous anthropologist' is an anthropologist (who has studied in Britain) who works in h/er own country. This includes Europeans from the continent but not white British anthropologists working in Britain. It is particularly used of African and Asian anthropologists working in their own country even if the culture they work in is culturally and geographically far removed from their own. It isn't used of the white South African Max Gluckman who worked in South Africa. What this term suggests, is that anthropologists interrogate the power relations of race and culture between ethnographer and participants not when they are different, but when they are equal. This is because ethnography is rooted in the theory of scientific objectivity which has been so heavily critiqued in feminist standpoint epistemologies. Anthropology has side-stepped standpoint epistemologies in order to retain its characteristic method, but has only tinkered with what remains an inherently racist perspective, rather than develop a strong alternative.

Nevertheless, the distancing effect offered by the 'scientific' objectivity of classic ethnographies is useful. Anthropology's project of comprehending (European and North American) human society by conducting research in Other cultures is a successful strategy, *vide* my own use of Richards's *Chisungu* to show the workings of gender as performative. The rigorous attention to detail axiomatic in the full ethnographic study conducted over at least a year means that a classic ethnography can remain significant after fifty years, when it was written according to the principles of a quite different academic school of thought. Living and working with a group of people for an extensive period makes it difficult to keep distance. As Nelson and Wright remarked, ethnography involves all the senses (in Nelson and Wright (eds.),

1994, p.48), it goes beyond the purely rational. Anthropological ethnographic method involves experiencing life as it is lived by Other peoples. However, this experience is all too often translated into the purely rational during the crucial stage of writing the ethnography. Anthropologists treated the communities in which they worked as bounded spaces, contained cultures, which could be studied from above by the (white) anthropologist who tried to see as much of social life as he could without disturbing local dynamics. They used a racist short cut to distancing.

The acute insights offered by distancing are not the prerogative of the 'God trick' style of science – as feminists have christened scientific objectivity. Distance from another is part of the Slave's positioning in Hegel's dialectic which offers understanding of the operation of power. However, the sort of distancing at play in scientific objectivity is gained via a short cut of racism or sexism. This can be contrasted to the labour of making distance from Self, which is similar to the labour incorporated in suffering knowledgeably.

5.3 Three errors made with good intentions

Interestingly, the race question in feminism has sometimes become problematic when white feminist thinkers have consciously tried in the most principled fashion to take it on board. Although this section of my chapter is highly critical of some feminist work, I mean it mainly as a warning on the ubiquitous nature of hegemonic discourse. I have reason to understand how easy it is to 'accidentally' write analysis that is compromised by prejudice. I will look first at an error in my own work, when I was explicitly tackling issues of race and made an analysis compromised in terms of class.

In 1997 I was given a vague commission to write a chapter on black lesbian literature (Pilgrim, 1998). Rather than reproduce or attempt to develop further the chapter I had already published on British black lesbian literature (in Mason-John (ed.) 1995), I decided to look at how both white and black lesbian writers create black characters. (I remain proud of the practical and politically activist character of this chapter.) Perhaps *because* I had forged into a sensitive political field which has not previously been explored

and has not had its dangers mapped out, I made a prejudicial blunder. In my account of one character, I wrote:

I'm not convinced by a black household kept like Gloria's. The tinned pineapple and peanut-butter sandwich in the fridge, wearing a crumpled wrap, stealing the iced cakes grandmother has brought round for the family – these sound more to me like a working-class white household. Black people are more prone to represent black households in terms of food from 'back home', which we value and hoard partly as an affirmation of our cultural identity.

Pilgrim, 1998, p.119.

I used a derogatory stereotype of working-class white women: incapable of proper house-keeping, slut and thief. I would like to say this came from the original novel but I know that I manipulated whatever was in Anna Livia's *Altogether Elsewhere* into this powerful and stigmatic Outsider-figure. That I blundered because I was working in a sensitive and un-mapped area is my excuse. I did so as one of many ways in which I iterate and generate the bourgeois power position in which I am situated.

In "The End of Innocence" (published in Butler and Scott, eds., 1992), Jane Flax has a wisely cynical insight into politics drawn from postmodernism:

what we really want is power in the world, not an innocent truth. The idea that truth is on one's side is a recurrent element in justificatory schemes for the actions of terrorists, fundamentalists, and producers of dangerous technologies.

ibid., p.458.

She tries to redress the unjust balance of power even in areas that favour herself: race politics, through postmodernism, which she compares to the writings of women of colour (I give the paragraph as a whole):

Some negative consequences of these beliefs can be seen in contemporary feminist theory. As some feminists have argued recently, an intensified concern about epistemological issues emerged at the same time as women of color began to critique the writings of white feminists. The unity of categories such as "woman" or "gender" was found to depend upon the exclusion of many of the experiences of women of color (as well as women outside the overdeveloped world, poor women and lesbians). As much if not more than postmodernism, the writings of women of color have compelled white feminists to confront problems of difference and the relations of domination that are the conditions of possibility for the coherence of our own theorizing and category formation. But our guilt and anxieties about racism (and our anger at the "others" for

disturbing the initial pleasure and comfort of “sisterhood”) also partially account for the discomfort and difficulties we white women have in rethinking differences and the nature of our own theorizing and statuses. Since the projects of postmodernism and women of color overlap here, I wonder whether there is a racial subtext at work that requires more attention. Since directly attacking women of color or voicing our resentment of them (in public) would be politically unthinkable, is it easier and more acceptable for white women to express our discomfort with difference discourses and the politics of knowledge claims by categorically rejecting postmodernism and branding it politically incorrect? Such constituting acts of exclusion or repression can only become evident when the power relations which enable the construction of knowledge claims are explicitly addressed.

ibid., p.459.

While Flax makes apparent that this should not be so, she still presents the situation as one in which it is the difference of women of colour which is disruptive of unity rather than the racist politics of WASP⁷ hegemony. Politically correct white feminists then appear to take out an understandable, even though not justifiable, resentment on the Cassandra-postmodernists⁸, who become the true victims of the piece.

The passage assumes the writings of women of colour have one effect: the troubling of the serene unity of white feminists. Flax doesn't consider that they may offer a unified category for women of colour. Neither black nor white feminists have any such unity yet Flax obscures this with her use of “we” and “our” to mean herself and other white feminists. This is in spite of the fact that other white feminists disagree with her postmodern project: a project with which the women of colour's project is supposed to ‘overlap’. Why can't “we” be Flax and some women of colour? Flax doesn't cite some of the postmodern writers who happen to be women of colour (Ien Ang, Trinh T. Minh-ha), so she can suggest postmodernism and black feminism only overlap rather than work together as projects. Flax suggests that to refuse the project of postmodernism is to be racist. Postmodernism does assert difference over I-identity but Flax doesn't speak of its unfortunate capacity to allow not just the differences liberals wish to celebrate such as

⁷ White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

⁸ Cassandra, the Trojan princess, was cursed with the ability to see the future but never be believed.

skin colour, sexual preference and sex/gender status but also the differences liberals didn't want at the party, such as racism, homophobia and sexism⁹.

I have shown how the repudiation of symbolic Outsider-figures in a hegemonic discourse can operate even in realms which are trying to work towards egalitarian values (see Chapter Three). In Britain in the 1980s, the *New Statesman* and *The Guardian* became complicit in a New Right discourse which created a certain political space through a repudiation of the symbolic black lesbian. Here, Flax subsumes the writings of women of colour that made feminism aware of differences in postmodernism. She utilises women of colour, not their writings but their bodies, as signs of difference, symbolic embodiments of postmodernism. We could represent her project, like that of the New Right, using Derrida's supplementarity in Bourdieu's figure of *doxa*.

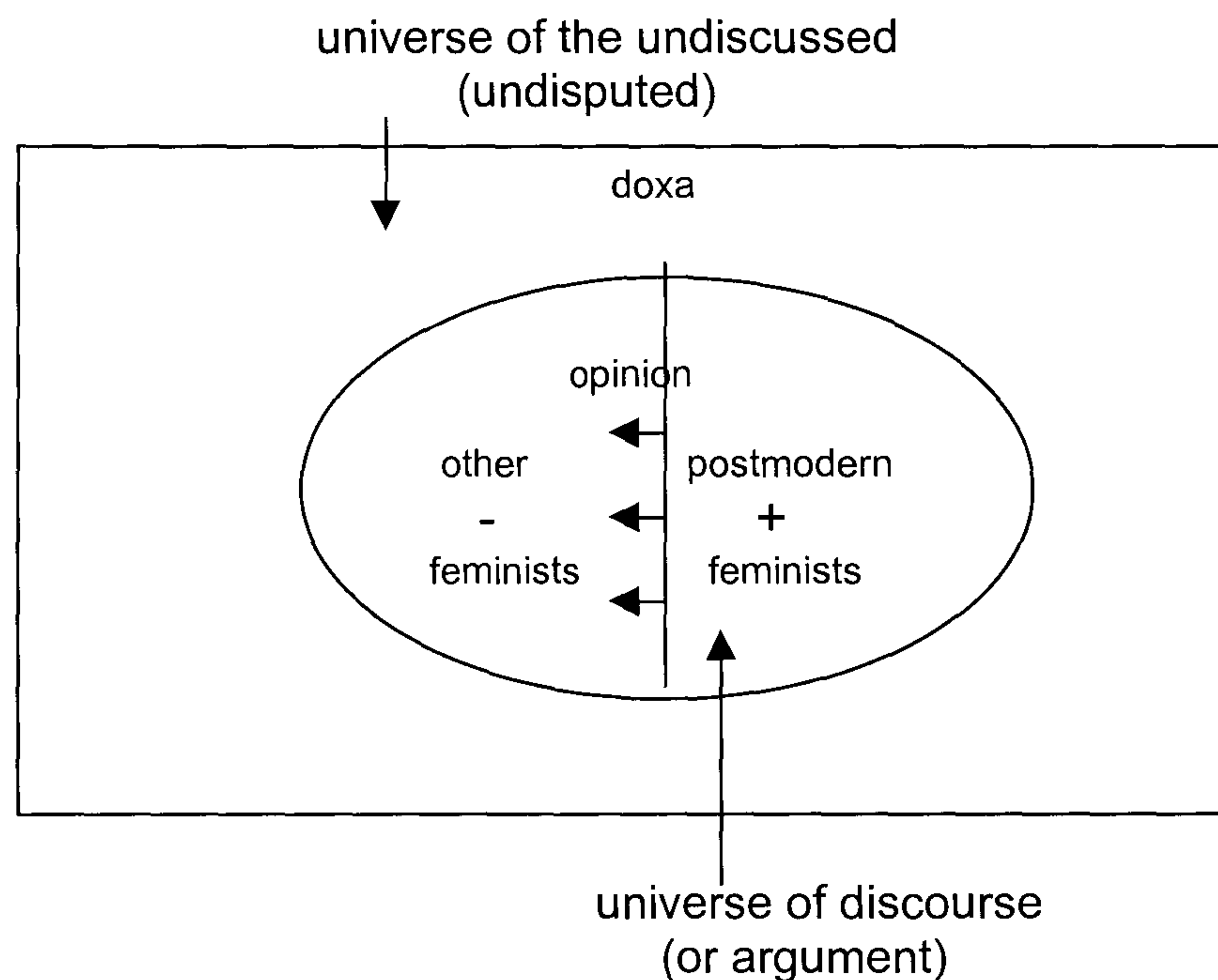


Fig. x: Flax's project to validate difference in diagrammatic form, drawing on Bourdieu, 1977.

When women of colour are made corporeal symbols of difference, they disappear from the "argument". They are "muted" and can only be spoken for by the postmodern feminists. *Doxa* (dominant values) can continue to proliferate behind the "argument" between postmodern and other, hidden by

⁹ In a paper delivered at the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths' College in February, 1999, Back discussed the way in which the internet was thought to be a potential

it. *Doxa* continues to disempower or “mute” women of colour, actually through postmodern women’s ostensible project of empowering them¹⁰.

Rather than draw on the experience through the epistemology of women of colour, Flax holds up the women as material for her argument. “[C]onstituting acts of exclusion” can indeed only become evident when the power relations such as racism are exposed in the “construction of knowledge claims” – like Flax’s claim to a postmodernist knowledge of difference. However, Flax’s effort shows that this can’t be done through postmodernism as a neutral place in which political justice is established. Postmodernism is profoundly antithetical to such ideas of *a priori* innocence.

The problem of using black women as material signs also figures in Donna Haraway’s “Ecce Homo, Ain’t (Ar’n’t) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape” (also published in Butler and Scott, eds., 1992). Haraway, too, is working on a politically sensitive and important project:

These matters make starkly clear why an adequate feminist theory of gender must *simultaneously* be a theory of racial and sexual difference in specific historical conditions of production and reproduction.

ibid., p.95. (Haraway’s italics).

She describes both Jesus Christ and the nineteenth century black women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth as “Western trickster figures”, but what she is actually arguing is that Sojourner Truth is a figure of/for humanity like Jesus Christ only in the scene where Pontius Pilate declares: “Ecce homo!”¹¹ She presents her project as the equating of Sojourner Truth with the sign of white masculinity and Western civilisation. She doesn’t discuss the significant anomaly of someone Jewish figuring white masculinity, which means that Sojourner Truth stands as wholly Other in comparison to Christ as sign of (white, Christian, male, able-bodied, young) marked value and power.

postmodern utopian site for the celebration of difference but has also provided a homeland for racist skinhead culture.

¹⁰ Seidler, 1989, offers a similar analysis of men disempowering women through the colonisation of feminism.

¹¹ “Here is the man!” Pilate says this as he presents Jesus to the crowd, who demand that he should be crucified. This is a significant phrase in the context of the Christian belief that the son of God chose to live and die as a man in order to save humanity.

Haraway does closely discuss Sojourner Truth's words and thinking – especially the concepts embodied in Truth's famous phrase "Ain't I a woman?" but she wants Truth's body too, she wants an organon to figure:

a collective humanity without constructing the cosmic closure of the unmarked category

...

the painful realities and practices of de-construction, dis-identification, and dis-memberment in the service of a newly articulated humanity.

ibid., pp.92-3.

It may at first appear that Haraway, like Bourdieu, is seeking to link body and knowledge. However, the body which Bourdieu refers to is not the concrete ontological biological body (in Althusser's material modality of a paving-stone or rifle). It is one which is subject to process, the mobile body (as in a collection) of embodied practices.

Judith Butler (Butler, 1993, pp.18-19) has protested that no given writer should be presumed to fully stand for the complexities of contemporary power. Although Butler meant to refer to the writer of the text on power – in this case Haraway – the argument can be stretched to cover any 'writer' or thinker of power, inside as well as outside the text. Neither Donna Haraway nor Sojourner Truth can be taken to figure humanity. The acquisition of Truth's body and person, a body which Truth herself struggled to liberate from slavery, troubles me even in such a noble cause as figuring the painful realities of postmodern humanity. The reference in Haraway's title to "Inappropriate/d Others" begins to seem sinister rather than inviting.

Flax, Haraway and I concentrate on Outsider-figures: black women, working-class women, rather than the Derridean process of supplementarity. We thereby collude in the creation of spaces, apparently empty but in fact occupied by our own white or bourgeois identities. The spaces we occupy appear neutral, empty, invisible or non-existent because as authors we are standing in them pointing out the Outsider-figures we have created, and as readers you expect to stand beside us and look where we are pointing, away from the spaces in which we are standing. As in the case of Linda Bellos and the left wing media, those who profess to be allies may have another agenda – hidden even from ourselves.

5.4 Subjective experience in feminist standpoint epistemologies

It appears that we will have to go back to the 1980s for a feminism which can handle the question of race, and the work of feminist writers drawing on their own experience to think through race and sex/gender: feminist standpoint epistemologies. This is the feminist philosophy within which I placed Agbabi's political activism in *The Black The White and The Blue*, a school of thought which draws on Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic and in particular his theory that those in a subordinate position (Slave) have a greater understanding of both their own and the dominant positioning. (See Harding, 1986, for a full account of feminist standpoint epistemologies.)

As I discussed in Chapter One, experience is not body but rather a process which locates and interprets emotions and thought, through embodied practices, in time and space. Black feminist standpoint theorists may thus have a subjective relationship not only to their own experience (via their own bodies) but also to (some specific) other black women's experiences (the same embodied practices).

Patricia J. Williams describes here her own experience trying to feel/think her way through being at once an academic lawyer and an African-American woman:

Since subject position is everything in my analysis of the law, you deserve to know that it's a bad morning.... This particular morning I'm sitting up in bed reading about redhibitory vices. A redhibitory vice is a defect in merchandise which, if existing at the time of purchase, gives rise to a claim allowing the buyer to return the thing and to get back part or all of the purchase price. The case I'm reading is an 1835 decision from Louisiana, involving the redhibitory vice of craziness:

The plaintiff alleged that he purchased of the defendant a slave named Kate, for which he paid \$500, and in two or three days after it was discovered the slave was crazy, and run away, and that the vices were known to the defendant...

Williams, 1991, p.3

There is a terrible tension here between the supposed neutral objectivity of academic analysis of the law and a subjective identification with the woman Kate – objectified and enslaved by a law. It's clear that we can't understand, or act to rectify, Kate's situation through the neutral objectivity of academic

thinking. (We can no longer rectify Kate's situation at all, of course, but that doesn't mean we can't act on it. Williams is aware that even though Kate is dead, she is not safe from the enemy – Benjamin, 1955, p.247.) The difficulties and contradictions of Williams's position are made clear through her own interpretation of her situation. Williams explicitly places herself as subjected¹² in relation to slavery in order to gain an affective and partial, rather than intellectual and supposedly neutral, understanding of law.

bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman* (hooks, 1981) – the title, like that of Haraway's article, echoes Sojourner Truth's words – draws on other women's experience from a subjective position. hooks shows how the particular history of African-American women in slavery accounts for the particular oppression of African-American women today, for example in Chapter Two she discusses how:

A devaluation of black woman hood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years.

hooks, 1981, p.53.

Systematic devaluation of black womanhood led to a downgrading of any activity black women did. Many black women attempted to shift the focus of attention away from sexuality by emphasizing their commitment to motherhood.... [Whites] labeled hard-working, self-sacrificing black women who were concerned with creating a loving, supportive environment for their families Aunt Jemimas, Sapphires, Amazons – all negative images that were based upon existing stereotypes of womanhood. In more recent years the labeling of black women matriarchs emerged as yet another attempt by the white male power structure to cast the positive contributions of black women in a negative light.

ibid., p.70.

The contemporary stereotyping of black women as 'matriarchs' is revealed as an oppressive practice masquerading as positive affirmation, through exposure of its links to the denigration of black women's strength in history. The experience of black women in slavery is used to clarify the experience of black women in the twentieth century domestic economy. This is not only through showing how the twentieth century situation derives from the earlier one, but also because we can see basic similarities between the experiences

¹² and thereby subjectivated, Butler would say (Butler, 1993, p.7).

of exploited and over-worked black women in both historical moments. Crucially, we also have a fuller understanding of white people in hooks's analysis. Unlike the friendly attempts of Flax and Haraway to comprehend black women, in which racism slipped behind the postmodern project and was hidden, this account, drawing on the experience of black women, exposes the active role of white discourse in creating, modulating and sustaining stereotypical figures of black women. The fuller understanding of this account is arrived at through the labour of subjective suffering, rather than via a short cut of some Othering practice – such as racism in classic anthropological ethnographic accounts.

What Agbabi attempts to do in *The Black The White and The Blue*, is to utilise standpoint epistemology as political activism. In the tradition of the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic, it appears that a more holistic perspective on the workings of hegemonic power comes from the subject position of the Outsider-figure. As a black woman, Agbabi has the Hegelian Slave's holistic understanding not only of her own experience but also of the white male subject of her poem, PC White. She shows how he constitutes his identity in a violent repudiation of blackness: the beating of a Bangladeshi immigrant; and in his desire for an Asian man: "muscular, bronzed". He doesn't consciously realise the bronzed object of his desire is Asian but there is of course an argument for a linkage between his violent repudiation of Asian men in the first half of the poem and sudden desire for an Asian man in the second half. (Stuart Hall speaks of a doubling of desire: "in the doubling, fear and desire double for one another and play across the structures of otherness" (Hall, 1988).) Within a standpoint account of the workings of race, Agbabi attempts to show how an understanding of sexuality can be arrived at through a comparison with the situation of race. In the same way, the volte-face editorial in *The Voice* turned on its earlier failure to comprehend Justin Fashanu's situation, when it pointed out that knowing what it's like to be treated as a second-class citizen because of racism hadn't led to an understanding of homophobia (*The Voice* editorial, 6.11.1990, quoted in Chapter Three). This comparative strategy, which harks back to de Beauvoir's « profondes analogies », has been successful but only in a limited

way. Agbabi stops her narrative at the moment before we can find out whether PC White changed his racist policing practice. The movement of the poem suggests he will do so, but to show him simply changing such complex and powerful practice overnight would lack conviction. Agbabi wisely leaves us living in hope. In spite of a successful campaign to support respect for black gay identities in *The Voice*, large sections of the black (heterosexual) communities remain as convinced as white communities that homosexuality is a disease, sometimes even seeing it as a 'white man's disease'. Williams tells us we "deserve to know it's a bad morning". She explains the painful subjective understanding of slavery which makes it bad but the morning doesn't get better.

Standpoint epistemology is limited when it comes to the understanding of diverse processes of identification. Beverley Skeggs's *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable* successfully examines (female) sex/gender as experienced through (working) class. (I will discuss this part of her study more fully in Chapter Six.) She also tries to show an awareness of the issues of race and implications for her study, not as has been commonly done through bemoaning a lack of black project participants, but by identifying the whiteness of her existing participants¹³. This is still not sufficient, without an explanation of how the dynamics of racism empower white working class women (whether or not actual black women are present to make that dynamic obvious). She draws on the work of many writers in the field of race studies, but in parallel to sex/gender rather than contributive to the analysis of gender in a heterosexual power matrix (de Beauvoir's « profondes analogies » again). Skeggs' analysis of heterosexuality is also problematic because she equates sexuality with race and sex/gender, etc.; all as parallel processes of identification:

We are born into heterosexuality as institution and dominant norm, just as we are into systems of gender, class and race.

Skeggs, 1997, pp. 119-120.

She continues, following Butler:

¹³ Butler has argued that it is only by foregrounding one "vector of power" that we can proceed with the analysis of identification. Skeggs explicitly designates sex/gender and class as the vector of power she will analyse, acknowledging her project to be compromised in the pursuit of practical research (Skeggs, 1997, p.166).

Heterosexuality is where subject positions such as mother, wife, girlfriend, are defined and institutionalized through a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms, a ritualized production, into which we are implicated on a daily basis (Butler, 1993).

ibid., p.120.

but she doesn't seem to follow through the whole implication of Butler's formulation: gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix. The important aspect of Butler's account for me, is how gender *underpins* heterosexuality i.e. works within it not alongside it.

Heterosexuality is defined by the exclusion of homosexuality as normal and hence what Phelan following Lacan would call invisible. Phelan's *unmarked* argues that powerful identities such as white, male or heterosexual derive part of their power from being invisible, taken for granted as normal. (Undiscussed in the hegemonic constitution of *doxa*, where 'woman' is created as a repudiated Outsider-figure, see *fig. iii.*, in Chapter Two.) Heterosexuality rests on the binary male/female within which male is powerful, normal and invisible in opposition to the visible and pathologised female. Skeggs claims her participants don't identify as heterosexual (=sexual), because as working class, their sexuality has been categorised as deviant. I suggest that they are uncomfortable doing so primarily because this would visibilise their heterosexuality (rather than Others' homosexuality) and secondly because they are pathologised within the power matrix (hetero)sexuality as women, as well as working class.

Skeggs, like Williams, speaks of 'subject positions'. Williams plays on the intellectual meaning of 'subject position' i.e. the position of the subject of her analysis, to develop her own (subjective/affective) position: she feels bad when she has to treat the enslavement of a woman like herself as a case under property law. In focussing on subject positions: heterosexual or white, however, Skeggs loses sight of the workings of supplementarity and hegemony. Her examination of subject positions *being repudiated* as Outsider-figures, such as working-class women, allows her to figure a more diverse identification: sex/gender within class dynamics.

Skeggs's study is sub-titled *Becoming Respectable* and the principles of respect and respectability are identified by her as key in her participants'

attempts to negotiate their situation. Following Bourdieu, she describes how they work with the types of capital he identified (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) in order to gain respect/respectability and socio-economic advantage for themselves and/or their children. It is when Skeggs looks at the working class women's negotiations in their situation from this perspective – taking a step back into the arena 'respectability' to get a broader view of the *workings* of sex/gender and class – that her analysis appears to gain coherence; that she is able to formulate sex/gender as modulated through class.

This success suggests how a feminism coming from white subjective experience might tackle the question of race. In the next section I will discuss feminists who can be thought of in the terms of queer theory. I described in relation to Agbabi's poem *Sentences* (and I will explore further in Chapter Seven) an idea drawn from queer activism: that anyone can inflect their experience to queer their perspective. This allows for the possibility that white feminists could theorise questions of race politics without replicating their own power position. What enables the feminist scholars to do so is a focus away from reified figures (who become symbolic Outsider-figures) like my white working-class woman or Flax's women of colour or Haraway's organon Sojourner Truth. A focus not on personal experience of suffering like Williams's or hooks's, instead on processes which they usually describe as Derridean supplementarity.

5.5 Queer theory

On the one hand, any analysis which foregrounds one vector of power over another will doubtless become vulnerable to criticisms that it not only ignores or devalues the others, but that its own constructions depend on the exclusion of the others in order to proceed. On the other hand, any analysis which pretends to be able to encompass every vector of power runs the risk of a certain epistemological imperialism which consists in the presupposition that any given writer might fully stand for and explain the complexities of contemporary power.

Butler, 1993, pp.18-19.

Judith Butler sets out the dilemmas for an analysis trying to develop a model of integrated, complex, inter-dependent identification. I have stated

above that Skeggs successfully does an analysis of class and sex/gender through fore-grounding this one vector of power, and in doing so acknowledges her project to be compromised. I have written about how Haraway ends by making Sojourner Truth stand for and explain the complexities of power in an inappropriation of her body as symbol.

Here I will examine how Butler and Phelan and Grant address the analysis of processes of identification. Butler herself stays within the parameters of her concern in that she does not “pretend” to encompass every vector of power but concentrates on the intersections of sex/gender and sexuality. However, she is being disingenuous when she recommends the foregrounding of only one vector of power. She herself does not analyse only one but at least two vectors of power (sex/gender and sexuality), and in her analyses of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*, she also talks about race.

Following Nietzsche, Butler argues that gender is:

always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.

Butler, 1990, p.25.

The contingent character of the process of gender identification, a fluctuation in time – or mutability in accordance with (the Marxist concept of) the historical present – are central to Butler’s conception of ‘woman’.

Butler charts a course for us between the Scylla of cultural determinism and the Charybdis of social constructivism. She rejects the idea of the liberal humanist agent freely choosing which gender to perform (Butler, 1993, p.x), but also suggests our notion of ‘construction’ gets in the way of an understanding of what is at play: “certain constructions appear constitutive, that is, have this character of being that “without which” we could not think at all,” (*ibid.*, p.xi)¹⁴. The belief that structures such as Culture, Discourse or Power construct the subject, a singular one-off act which fixes the subject

¹⁴ “People often assume that if something is social it is also somehow fragile and can be changed quickly. For example, some right wing anti-gay literature now argues that since homosexuality is socially constructed, people can (and should) easily change their sexual orientation.” Rubin interviewed by Butler, pp.69-70, *differences* 6.2 +3 (1994). I.e. just because sexuality is constructed and can be deconstructed doesn’t mean we can be re-constructed.

forever informs a misreading of Foucauldian thought which sees it as personifying Power:

What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.*

ibid., p.9, (Butler's italics).

"Sex" is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.

ibid., p.2.

For Butler, the compulsion calling "one" into being through the norm of "sex": the imperative interpellating us as social beings (or doings, as Butler would have it) is the power matrix (hetero)sexuality. Sexuality invisibly (as Phelan would say) identifying as heterosexual through the hidden repudiation of homosexuality, calls us to fall into the two categories male and female which underpin it.

This process operates through the creation and expulsion of excess: abject, unintelligible bodies¹⁵. Lack of fit anywhere along a chain of identification iterating itself results in repulsion:

We see this most clearly in the examples of those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered; it is their very humanness that comes into question.

ibid., p.8.

If gender identity fails to follow perceived biological sex: assertive women, men who cry, cross-dressing; or if sexual desire fails to fit the opposite-sex attraction of heterosexuality, then humiliating, potentially violent and sometimes fatal expulsion from the social order will usually follow¹⁶.

Butler's work is marked throughout by an awareness that working to a definition of "the body" through the two problematics of materiality and sex/gender underpinned by sexuality excludes crucial issues of race, class, etc.. She traces this exclusion back as far as Plato:

¹⁵ Butler describes these excess, abject and unintelligible bodies as working like Derrida's supplement.

¹⁶ As when David Dibosa was attacked in what he had thought of as his own neighbourhood (quoted, Back, 1996, p.270).

Plato's scenography of intelligibility depends on the exclusion of women, slaves, children, and animals, where slaves are characterized as those who do not speak his language, and who, in not speaking his language, are considered diminished in their capacity for reason. This xenophobic exclusion operates through the production of racialized Others, and those whose "natures" are considered less rational by virtue of their appointed task in the process of laboring to reproduce the conditions of private life.

ibid, p.48.¹⁷

She remarks on the problems in a hierarchy of oppressions very early in

Gender Trouble:

listing the varieties of oppression, as I began to do, assumes their discrete, sequential coexistence along a horizontal axis that does not describe their convergences within the social field. A vertical model is similarly insufficient; oppressions cannot be summarily ranked, causally related, distributed among planes of "originality" and "derivativeness."

Butler, 1990, p.13.

She does argue:

It would be wrong to think that the discussion of "identity" ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that "persons" only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility.

Ibid., p.16 (Butler's italics).

but is not trying to put gender in front of race or any other identity:

given that normative heterosexuality is clearly not the only regulatory regime operative in the production of bodily contours or setting the limits to bodily intelligibility, it makes sense to ask what other regimes of regulatory production contour the materiality of bodies. Here it seems that the social regulation of race emerges not simply as another, fully separable, domain of power from sexual difference or sexuality, but that its "addition" subverts the monolithic workings of the heterosexual imperative as I have described it so far. The symbolic – that register of regulatory ideality – is also and always a racial industry, indeed the reiterated practice of *racializing* interpellations.

Butler, 1993, pp.17-18 (Butler's italics).

Butler follows Gilroy's thinking on questions of race. She works with Lacanian thinking, leading into Joan Rivière's work, and with Derrida's concept of supplementarity:

¹⁷ So ancient is the trap which tells some of us we are better at feeling than thinking.

The excessive matter that cannot be contained within the form/matter distinction operates like the supplement in Derrida's analysis of philosophical opposition.

ibid., p.38.

Recently, she has addressed herself to Bourdieu's concept of the performative as an utterance by a subject already authorised by social power. Butler is interested in those who "speak with authority *without* being authorized to speak" (Butler, in Schusterman (ed.), 1999, p.123, Butler's italics), e.g. those who manage to resignify terms such as 'queer' or 'black' even though we are disempowered by those in a position of power over cultural capital. This is an example of Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse, but I will argue in my next section that it isn't, as Butler hopes, subversive.

Peggy Phelan's article "Failed liver(s): whatever happened to her public grief? In memory of Rena Grant (1959-1992)" (in Phelan, 1997) cites the work of Rena Grant exploring a particular moment in Joan Rivière's "Womanliness as Masquerade". The analysand in Rivière's article is a woman whose childhood was spent "in the Southern States of America". Part of Rivière's analysis is based on a dream the analysand has had in which she seduces/is seduced by a "negro". In Rivière's account, the "negro", almost as soon as labelled, ceases to be referred to in terms of race and Rivière's analysis revolves around how her analysand constructs femininity through this phantasy masculinity. Grant and Phelan, however, show how the phantasy is a rare moment in which the tangled lines of sex/gender and race are exposed together:

we have to add to our analysis of Riviere's patient that she is masquerading not only as a woman, but as white

(Grant, 1992: 60), cited Phelan, 1997, p.139. (Phelan's italics.)

Therefore in the strange calculus of erotic desire – desire that often converts narcissistic aggression into sadism – the performance of white women's false sexual innocence constructs another subject position, another body, in this case the black man's body, upon whom difference (and sexual guilt) is inscribed. This body, in turn, is introjected back onto the white woman's psyche as contiguous with her own (in part because she has created it, reproduced it, made it). It is precisely the contiguity of the other's body that motivates hysterical identifications. Discovering then what a white woman wants, Grant suggests, will then be a matter of reconsidering

her relation not to the drives as Freud proposed, but rather in relation to the All, the white patriarchal Symbolic where woman is not-All. And, Grant concludes, "what this relation is, God only knows"

ibid., pp.139-40. (Phelan's italics.)

Phelan here simultaneously critiques classic Freudian psychoanalysis for attributing to psycho-emotional drives what is rather a relationship of societal power structures (matrices of power as in the heterosexual matrix and a matrix of race politics), and offers a perspective which can recognise and analyse how a specific white femininity is constructed at a particular moment in time, in relation to a (phantasy/alter ego) black masculinity. Unlike Skeggs's account, Phelan's psychoanalytic account with its strong awareness of the symbolic recognises that the black man doesn't actually have to be there to sustain a white-dominant race dynamic. Later in the same article, Phelan draws on Grant's analysis of the film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and the murder by Jane of the Hispanic maid:

Elvira's race and class position in relation to Jane make it impossible for Jane to confuse Elvira with her own ego-ideal or internal imago.

ibid., p.143. (Phelan's italics.)

By taking a step back into the arena of psychoanalytic thinking, Phelan and Grant show how race and class intersect with, feed, disguise sex/gender (and each other). This is without one identity being prioritised over another, or the person of the author having to stand for and explain the complexities of contemporary power, or another person having to do so. Elvira and Jane offer this understanding between them, but in the first place they are fictional characters and their motives as constituted within the authorially constructed text are therefore available to us to analyse in a way which will not affect them – whatever we say of their relationship, Elvira will continue to be murdered by Jane. In the second place, it is the relationship between the two – in terms of class and race – rather than the position of one of them, which is being examined here. Class and race, like Bourdieu's ranks of sex, age and "position in the relations of production", here create a universe of the undiscussed (*doxa*/hegemony). The contradiction of Elvira's Hispanic working-class position and Jane's white middle-class position mean that the murder has a hidden psychological symbolism in the film. I suggest that that

contradiction, the relation to the white patriarchal Symbolic which Grant can't identify, is supplementarity. By examining the dynamic of supplementarity (the contradiction) rather than the Outsider-figure created (the Hispanic maid), Phelan and Grant expose the workings of matrices of power at play.

Just as Skeggs takes a 'step back' to look at sex/gender and class in the arena of respectability, Phelan takes a 'step back' to look at race, class and sex/gender in the arena of psycho-social drives. Emma Donoghue's work (see Chapter Three) also takes a 'step back', seeing the mutual reinforcement of racism, sexism and lesbophobia in literature in the past. Anna Marie Smith's study (see Chapter Three) takes a 'step back' to examine race and sexuality in the political realm. Just as Phelan concentrates on a *relationship* in terms of class and race rather than the class and race identities of the two individuals Elvira and Jane, Smith looks at the *processes* of racism and homophobia.

Following Butler's argument that a (hetero)sexual matrix (of power) is underpinned by a binary sex/gender system, Smith's material shows how race and sexuality are articulated by the New Right in the workings of (white) racial and (hetero)sexual discourse in a manner which feeds and supports sexism, heterosexism and racism in order to underpin white patriarchy. Donoghue's study shows that this is not a recent phenomenon.

These academic feminists are practising the same technique as my participants. Entering the arena of performance, my participants work through experience to utilise what is a politically open space for the presentation of a complex of identification. Each of the feminist writers I describe delineates an arena in which to explore through theory and data¹⁸ processes of identification instead of focussing on a reified figure to theorise identity. They also all work in a way which I consider sympathetic to queer theory.

Queer theory is a feminism. I would see the multiplicity of identities which Mercer celebrates as coming after feminist thinking as part of a queer movement. The work of certain black British artists across the 1980s and 1990s is marked by a queer sensibility: Isaac Julien's black gallery attendant

¹⁸ This is also experience, in Skeggs' definition. (See § 1.3.)

seizing the whip (*The Attendant*, dir. Julien, 1993); buttocks descending on the Benin sculpture in Rotimi Fani-Kayode's *Bronze Head*; Patience Agbabi's *Sex Is*¹⁹. In the same way, queer theory is fundamentally enabled by principles established by feminisms and in some cases by inter-feminist disputes such as the so-called "sex wars" (see next section). Queer theory also draws on psychoanalytic insights:

no queer theory can think repudiation and its consequences
without an appropriation of psychoanalysis.

Butler in Munt (ed.), 1999, p.277.

Althusser (interpellation) and Derrida (supplementarity) are part of an arch of queer theory in which Foucault is the keystone.

Queer theory moves beyond feminist standpoint epistemology. (However, if we follow Buck-Morss's argument and can work with Hegel but against the racist and colonialist strands in his thinking - see Introduction - queer theory may bring us closer to Hegel. Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic was conceived not only through an understanding of actual slaves' experience of suffering but by a European in the powerful position of the Master.) The queer understanding of the relationship to experience emerges most clearly in queer activist politics (as in the leaflet I cited in Chapter One, p.27). Queer theory is often characterised as an incomprehensible academic paradigm, far removed from the 'real' world. In fact queer theory is linked to politics in a way which disrupts the attempts at neutrality which characterise other academic paradigms. Because it is a feminism, it acknowledges its partial perspective. Through its commitment to feminist principles and a practice of working through experience, it avoids the lazy distancing which 'scientific' objectivity achieves through racist and sexist thinking. Because it is from postmodern schools of thought, queer theory considers all positions to be always already corrupted by power. It is critically concerned with thinking about bodies and political action from a position of abjection and unintelligibility. Butler argues that succeeding in speaking with authority when

¹⁹ Some like it with a he
some like it with a she
some like to think we should all conform
to the nuclear family
some like to charge a fee
from 'Sex Is' in Agbabi, 1995.

we are not authorised to speak subverts the hegemonies which repudiate us as excess bodies.

Queer activism has often been criticised as a preserve of white gay men which fails to offer more than lip-service to issues of gender and race politics. While it is true that Queer Nation and Outrage were dominated by white gay men, who exercised their value systems in other arenas of power as allies do (see my critique of Flax and Haraway), I think the principles of queer remain inclusive. Queer was not only the AIDS die-ins, it was also the rainbow flag – symbolising a coalition across many ‘races’ and ‘communities’. Drag queens are acknowledged to be the ones who finally rioted against police repression at the Stonewall Bar in New York in June, 1969, the symbolic moment from which gay activist politics dates itself. However, there are no drag queens on the web-site for British gay rights lobby the Stonewall Group. The queer movement was partly initiated by the failure of the gay rights movement to allow practices like drag. Assimilationist gay rights movements assert that gay people deserve civil rights because we are ‘Good As You’ – exactly the same except for the sex (biological) of our partner (only one – just like you). Queer asserts that we are radically different in a multitude of ways which may include being black, cross-dressing, having more than one partner instead of living in a heterosexual style couple, enjoying ‘kinky’ sexual practices, but that this is no basis for excluding us from civil and social rights.

Queer theory and activism are open to the presence of diversity even though they are currently peopled principally by whites and the middle classes. Queer is not open on the basis either of white domination or white liberal guilt but on an understanding of a mobile politics of power in which we should all strive to inflect our positions with an ironic sense of their lack of innocence. Since none of us can ‘really’ match the ideal (Chomsky’s ‘competence’) which hegemonic discourse sets up for us, instead of hiding our own shabby mistake-riddled performance by projecting it onto and then repudiating a designated Outsider-figure, we could celebrate our being abject and unintelligible. Butler’s argument that no given writer can “fully stand for and explain the complexities of contemporary power” can be by-passed if we

acknowledge that each of us can fully stand for the complexities of contemporary power, some in more dominant and others in more subordinated positions. This narrows the problem down to one of who can fully explain those complexities. We can further narrow it down as one of how can those people who do explain those complexities manage to do so – the problem I have explored in this chapter. The problem isn't so much that no one can fully explain complexities of power but how to do so in a way that doesn't succumb to "epistemological imperialism".

Recently, queer theory has suffered from a backlash critique which defines it in a limited way. Jonathon Dollimore, for example, has remarked "Pleasure ... and shock are not sufficient in themselves for radical politics." (Radical Philosophy conference, 13.5.2000). Queer is indeed a politics of pleasure – although this is not all it is and pleasure is not here the handle to frivolity which Dollimore takes it to be. The debate over pornography central to the "sex wars" (see Mercer, 1994, p.133) put questions of pleasure and desire onto the table. Queer took up the serious validation of pleasure as part of its agenda. (In my next Chapter, I will offer accounts by Valerie Mason-John of queer activity which seeks seriously to validate pleasure.) This project is not taken up in a frivolous spirit but rather in the face of violent efforts by people and governments to refuse lesbian, bisexual, gay; butch, femme and drag; trans-sexual identification, bars, saunas, clubs, homes, cruising grounds, holding hands. When people have died for the pleasure of being who they are called into being, pleasure becomes a serious business. Venus Xtravaganza²⁰, Brandon Teena²¹, Justin Fashanu²² are not safe unless history takes pleasure seriously.

An article by Elisa Glick (Glick, 2000) criticises both Butler and Rubin as representative of queer theory, on the grounds that they are in line with "pro-sexuality" arguments from the 1980s "sex wars". Glick represents the "sex wars" as an attack by sex radicals (butch/femme and S/M lesbians) valorising transgression against "Mother Feminism" (Glick, 2000, p.21). In

²⁰ The pre-operative trans-sexual in *Paris Is Burning* who was murdered at the time the film was being made.

²¹ The cross-dressing woman raped and murdered when she was found to be a woman in Falls City, Nebraska on New Year's Eve, 1993.

²² See Chapter Three.

fact the “sex wars” were precipitated by hostile critique of butch/femme and S/M practices by radical feminists, against which women whose sexuality was seen as reprehensibly transgressive such as Gayle Rubin, Joan Nestle or Pat Califia, turned to defend themselves. Glick also criticises Rubin and Butler for failing to challenge the political and economic conditions under which queerness is devalued, and for failing to take issues of race and class into account.

Rubin actually provides a wealth of cross-cultural and specific economic and historical detail in her writing. “The Traffic in Women” is written from within anthropology and refers to several ethnographies from many cultures. “Thinking Sex” locates itself more specifically in Britain and the United States, with detailed references to legal and economic sanctions wielded against e.g. bath-houses, and the effects on gay communities of urban development policies. As I have shown above, Butler offers a reflexive consideration of the question of race and whether it can be managed in the analysis of gender and sexuality.

Those such as Rubin, Nestle and Califia did indeed fore-ground queer theory. Rubin’s arguments about the sex/gender economy in which sexuality is sustained by gender and about the need to respect a diversity of sexual styles rather than the queer/straight binary; Nestle’s celebratory reclamation of a history of butch/femme presence in defiance of violent legal sanctions; and Califia’s argument that queer practices go beyond biological sex, are enmeshed in queer thinking. What the work of Sedgwick and Butler in 1990 did, was to take queer away from its battle with radical feminism and put it into a Derridean frame. They showed how the hegemonic project of heterosexual power is always already dependent on the abjected figure of homosexuality who is central in every realm from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (the heart of the white North American literary canon) to being ‘woman’.

This dependency of hegemony on the abjected figure (which we could characterise as the dependency of *doxa* on the Outsider-figure, see *fig. ii* and *fig. iv* above) shouldn’t be understood in a way which reifies the two positions which it establishes: dominant and repudiated/object. As Butler remarks (see

my p.191), the repudiated/abject constituted by supplementary relations operates like Derrida's supplement. Butler argues that the repudiated/abject is excess, its very humanness comes into question, it destabilises the binary we often take to be natural and *a priori*. Queer activism offers the possibility for all of us, not just the 'excess' and de-humanised, to work at destabilising rather than constituting normative binary dynamics.

Many of those who were writing queer theory were also involved in activism (Isaac Julien, Kobena Mercer, Anna Marie Smith, Simon Watney) and it is from queer activist politics that the idea that anyone can be queer is largely drawn. In queer, it isn't what positions we occupy that determine the possibility of subversive political intervention as in standpoint theories. It isn't our experience derived from an ontological understanding of being black, female or gay and therefore in the position of Hegel's Slave which will determine how we comprehend the politics of the situation. It isn't how much we have suffered that will determine how much we understand. Rather it is the layer of knowledge which Skeggs and Moore write about, and which as Brah shows can also be defined as part of experience (see Chapter One), which determines our comprehension and action. Here is a way to escape the racism implicit in the ethnographic method: reflexivity rather than racism; the hard work of understanding the difference which offers distance instead of the short cut of racism which adopts a differentiating distance without stopping to interrogate the relations of power on which that distance is based.

Butler argues that it's possible to occupy the abjected body in an ironic fashion such that we can celebrate what the rest of society repudiates. She argues that this is subversive of hegemonic discourse. I will argue that this celebratory occupation of the abjected body in whom we are called into being against social normativity, is a defensive action. It doesn't undermine hegemony although it does raise a "muted" voice against hegemony in spite of efforts to de-naturalize and repudiate the heterodox from the charmed circle of social being. What is subversive is when those in the position of *orthodoxy* speak their situation with irony.

In this next section I will show how respecting multiple identities instead of reifying butch, femme and drag, encourages a richer frame for the

analysis of the processes of identification. I draw on the experience and performances of British black and Asian drag queens, women defining as butch/femme and artists working with the themes of drag and butch and femme to expand on critical reflections on what is a highly specific New York black and Latina drag community. (I also draw on white writers who are sometimes consciously seeking the dynamics of race politics in butch/femme experience.) In this account, it becomes imperative to consider not only an intersection between gender and race politics, and the way in which sexuality calls gender into being, but also questions of class. The fact that this emerges without my anticipating it supports my argument for the necessity of attending to dynamic processes rather than reified Outsider-figures in order to avoid reproducing the “previously static order”.

5.6 Drag queens, butches and femmes

It is easy to reify drag queens, butches and femmes, who have long been reified stereotypes of gay identity. Drag queens and butches are particularly visible transgressors of hetero-normative culture. However, actual drag, butch and femme experience is highly diverse. (As can be seen in the vocabulary developed within femme/butch culture to try to classify different types of butch and femme: stone butch, soft butch, high femme, power femme, femme top²³.)

Butler’s work relies on a concept of butch to question gender and many feminist arguments engage with drag as a kind of testing ground for gender theory. These include hooks (black feminist standpoint epistemology) and Butler (queer theory), for whom drag queens, like butches and femmes, are “excess”, abject beings in the heterosexual economy. When feminists have discussed drag recently, however, it is only through one representation of drag, Jennie Livingston’s film *Paris Is Burning* (1991). Peggy Phelan even has a friend who warns her: “to be sure I keep saying I’m only writing about

²³ I shan’t define these terms here, many of which are based in sexual practices, I only want to list them to show that there is a diversity of experience.

Livingston's film of the balls and I'm not writing about the balls themselves" (Phelan, 1993, p.104), but she doesn't seem to understand quite why.

Paris Is Burning is a documentary ethnography of black and Latina contestants in the drag balls of Harlem, filmed between 1985 and 1989. Black and white gay male critics loved it:

The authentic voice of this community emerges unfettered
Essex Hemphill, cited Phelan, 1993, p.103,

but bell hooks condemned it firstly for celebrating misogynist and racist practices, and secondly for a lack of reflexive thinking about the supposed documentary neutrality of Livingston's white anthropological gaze.

hooks's critique of drag depends on a definition of it as performance. She begins by locating her analysis in her personal experience of cross-dressing: "It was a form of ritual, of play." (hooks, 1992, p.145). Quotes from an old journal support the idea of this practice as play. hooks says: "I want us to be boys together" (*ibid.*) – not men, but boys. She gives examples of black comedians impersonating women in a derogatory way. I suggest that these comedians' dressing as women is not comparable to the drag practised by the queens of the Harlem balls. There is a long tradition of the imitation of women in comedy (almost all the white comedians of a certain era in Britain, for example, included dragging up as part of their acts: the 'Carry On' team, Les Dawson, Eric Morecombe and Ernie Wise, the two Ronnies). The mockery of women implicit in this kind of drag is in line with misogynist 'mother-in-law' jokes. The misogyny is that of male comics of a certain time and place, rather than of drag.

As Butler remarks, "there are forms of drag that heterosexual culture produces for itself" (Butler, 1993, p.126). When the England rugby player Victor Ubogu wears a gold lamé ballgown for a Christmas issue of *Rugby World* (1995), he does drag in a profoundly different manner to Miss Kimberley dancing with a cross-dressed white woman at the gay festival Summer Rites. Ubogu is not only a rugby player but a prop²⁴. In this world of super-macho, cross-dressing can only further underline a heterosexual

²⁴ Forward player with a bigger, stockier build designed for strong play in the scrums, as opposed to backs, who develop leaner bodies for speed (and are sometimes referred to as 'the girls' or 'Jessicas').

masculinity by throwing the light of contrast on it. Ho ho ho, Ubogu poses as a fairy, when he is so exemplary of heterosexual masculinity: a big, black²⁵, male rugby player.

Slim, tall, built like a model, Miss Kimberley operates in the gay male world of clubbing. Hostess at a number of gay venues, she is also a performed persona to Tatum O'Brien who acts other, non-drag characters. A third character, more like that described by hooks, is enacted by comedian Wayne Rollins. He describes 'Dibbi' as his most popular character. "[S]he's a mixture of my mum, my aunt and women in general," Rollins says (quoted in *The Voice*, June 26, 2000). In the photo accompanying the article about Rollins, 'Dibbi' teeters precariously on high heels in an unbecoming outfit of mini skirt and fake pearls. No one would mistake this for that "vile and precious merchandise", as Wittig bitingly calls us, a 'woman'. Rollins draws on aspects of femininity which are socially despised, such as excessive and sluttish sexuality enacted by an inappropriate body: too large, awkward and muscular. By contrast, Miss Kimberley enacts aspects of femininity we can call 'precious' in every sense of the word; she is de Beauvoir's « femme « vraiment femme » »: tall, slim and elegant with long legs and outfits to die for. Ubogu, Rollins and O'Brien are all black men doing drag to entertain but there are profound differences in who their drag speaks to, why and how.

Butler's more sympathetic reading of *Paris Is Burning* ("Gender is burning" in *Bodies That Matter*) derives from her earlier thinking about butch and femme in *Gender Trouble*²⁶. For Butler, butch and femme serve to show us the parodic nature of all gender identity. There is no butch/femme copy of the heterosexual male/female binary but rather the copy of a copy which uncovers heterosexuality's pretended claim to originality and thereby destabilizes the terms of the heterosexual matrix. Butch isn't a copy of an original masculinity but exposes the way in which masculinity doesn't derive in a 'natural' way from a male body: or the butch couldn't do it so successfully.

²⁵ See my account of Justin Fashanu, Chapter Three for a note on the super-machismo of black masculinity in sport.

²⁶ In some senses it derives from her looking at the film from a gay perspective rather than a black one. For example, where hooks castigates Livingston for the unacknowledged whiteness of her gaze, Butler asks whether this gaze is also lesbian and why we don't also talk about that.

(Significantly, 'realness' is a much used term in *Paris Is Burning*, by which the drag queens themselves signal an ability to blend in, to pass, to be unremarkable and marked with value (in Phelan's Lacanian terms) instead of visible as Other.)

To what extent are butch and femme subversive, as Butler suggests? We must dismiss the idea that butch and femme, and therefore camp and drag as well, are performed, in the sense of freely chosen playful identities which could be dropped or altered without psychic violence, if only those enacting them would stiffen their wrists/ behave like 'nice' girls. Crossing the boundaries of 'proper' gender behaviour is as cruelly punished as coming out as gay – sometimes by death. Nobody would continue to enact identity under these conditions for the fun of performance. Secondly, we must bear in mind that if, as Butler argues, there is no original male/female; no neat binary division into two sexes, there can't be a neat binary butch/femme either. Like drag queens, those who identify butch and femme do so not as two clearly box-able groups but as people inflecting their individuality with particular styles. For example, butch, femme and drag are enacted within cultural specifics.

Questions of culture are foremost in Zahid Dar's writing, where culture is not only about ethnicity but also sexuality. In papers he has written, Dar draws on his personal experience between India and Britain:

As a child, my grandmother would tell me tales of Kashmir, of our past. I never believed them as an adult and never thought I would find such visible signs of our history.

Dar, 1998a, p.75.

He talks of the affirmation of seeing shop signs with his family name: Dar Motors, Dar Palace Hotel, but adds:

in travelling through the country I was made aware that I was not treated like a native, someone who belonged, but as a visitor, a tourist ... it was hard to accept that I could never be an Indian in India or be treated as an equal British citizen in Britain.

ibid., pp.74-5.

It isn't only because of racism that Dar can never be treated as an equal citizen in Britain, even within the British Asian community he doesn't get equal treatment. In "How to survive as an Asian Drag Queen and live to tell the tale", Dar writes about refusals in the British Asian community to stage the

play (*That hateful chant*) *PakiBoy* (written by Tenebris Light), in which Dar played a gay kathak dancer. Programmers argued that the play was too offensive for the Asian community. At the same time, plays were being staged featuring an Asian woman escaping an arranged marriage or a foul-mouthed drunkard, without reflection on the reinforcement of stereotypes of Asian sexuality and marriage practices or a policy of presenting 'difference' in the community through the portrayal of negative heterosexual characters rather than positive homosexual characters.

In *Gunghroo are Go-Go* (performed at the *Sweet Like Burfi* festival, 18 February 2000²⁷) Dar mingles references to a queer sub-culture (leather harness, condom filled with banana smoothie) with references to Asian and British cultural heritages (a backdrop showing *The Thunderbirds* with Urdu voice-over, kathak dance in front of a backdrop of London cityscape scenes). Sexuality and gender performative are placed in cultural context. As one of the femmes quoted by Louise Carolin (in Munt (ed.), 1998) says of her femme-ininity:

It feels like a part of me like any other part: my Asian-ness, my Italian-ness, or my London background.

Aisha, quoted by Carolin in Munt (ed.), 1998, p.114.

Following Joan Nestle's reclamation of working class butch/femme culture in North America, many have come to think of butch and femme as class based identities²⁸. However, Radclyffe Hall, Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis were all upper class butch and femme women. The collection of accounts by Monika Reinfelder (Reinfelder, 1996) reveals that butch and femme are recognised identities in many different geographical locations (often to the disapproval of new local feminist movements). These identities are not exclusive to modernity. One of Martial's epigrams (*Epigrammata* VII.67, 1st century A.D.) describes the "tribade" Philaenis in a mocking account of Roman machismo.

Lesbian Philaenis sodomizes boys and, more cruel than a husband's lust, penetrates eleven girls per diem.

²⁷ The programme note for *Sweet Like Burfi* calls the piece 'Sound of a Dancing Image'.

²⁸ This can be a useful strategy against radical feminists critical of butch/femme, who can be accused of classism if butch/femme are understood to be specific forms of working class identity.

Martial, 1st century A.D., from VII.67.

Philaenis wrestles and thinks nothing of throwing up her six pints of wine and then eating sixteen “colloephia” – the meat of athletes. Although Martial’s perspective is of course radically different to Butler’s, he is suggesting that butch identity can parody masculinity.

The playwright Nina Rapi describes here the specific workings of (modern) Greek culture in relation to butch and lesbian identity. Her description reveals butch identity not as a parody of machismo but as uncomfortably situated in the discourse of gender politics:

A butch dyke ... can be both ridiculed for being unfeminine, and revered for having *magia* ie being tough, street-wise and having a code of honour.

Rapi in Munt (ed.), 1998, p.170.

In a “culture that adores the male”:

men can be excused for practically anything done in the name of ‘manhood’, while women can be condemned for practically anything that does not conform to the traditional notions of ‘womanhood’, Greeks can regard male homosexuality as ‘weakness’, hence forgivable, but ‘lesbianism’ as ‘evil and immoral’, hence unforgivable. The ‘active’ homosexual retains his manhood by virtue of being a ‘top’, while the homosexual ‘bottom’ can be pardoned his weakness because he is after all servicing the man. Besides, men can be allowed illicit pleasure while women are not even meant to want pleasure, let alone elicit it.

ibid., p.173

Although butches are vulnerable to hostility because their success in escaping hetero-normative gender stereotypes is highly visible, in a culture that values machismo, their masculinity may occasionally also be valuable cultural capital. Fitting the self which we feel called into being into these contradictory specifics is the arduous daily life of those who can’t relax into the conscriptive and constrictive discourse of hetero-normativity.

Cherry Smyth's analysis of one of Perminder Sekhon's photographs also describes the location of butch gender in a cultural context:

Perminder Sekhon’s ‘Four Asian Butches’, 1997, situates the women in front of a London ‘Cash and Carry’, referencing the socio-economic realities for many Asians in Britain, whose livelihood depends on wholesale merchandising. The shop is noticeably closed, suggesting that this route of business is not open to those in the family who do not conform, despite their

sharp suits and ties. The street is otherwise empty. Does this signal that the photographer chose a safer time to stage the shoot?

Smyth, in Munt (ed.), 1998, p.84.

In this photograph, the four butches are smartly dressed in “sharp suits and ties” but as Smyth points out, this cultural capital will be barred from conversion into economic capital because it is judged counterfeit when it transgresses sex/gender regulation.

Photographer, playwright and actor, Sekhon defines primarily as femme. She grew up in London, so much within the Asian community that from primary school until she was eighteen, she never mixed with white people. Nevertheless, she describes her life as marked by struggle with her feelings of difference. Being gay, she never felt quite right. Here she describes an early fear of being judged inauthentic:

When I was at school, being a coconut²⁹ was the worst thing you could be I always had a big struggle trying to prove my Asian-ness I didn't want to do anything that was going to be an obstacle between me and my Asian community.

Unpublished interview, May 2000.

When she left college (a "small college in Lancashire", where she studied English and Drama), Sekhon worked in a women's refuge and then came back to London. She now works at the Naz Project³⁰ as well as continuing to perform pieces such as *Not Just An Asian Babe* and *Madhuri Dixit, I Love You*. She started exhibiting her photographs in 1998. Here she talks about the series of images she has created of Asian butches. (I think it is important to bear in mind that these shots were not naturalistic, but stylised. As long as the models – personal friends – were comfortable, Sekhon's aim was "to take it a couple of degrees further".)

I was working against the grain. I wanted to create images of Asian women that are traditionally degraded and that's not what an Asian woman should look like; she shouldn't be scary and strong and masculine with short hair, wearing a suit, smoking a cigarette because they're not celebrated features. They're only celebrated in men.

²⁹ 'Coconut' is a term of abuse meaning brown on the outside (dark skin i.e. racially 'black') and white on the inside (culturally 'white', so not 'really' 'black').

³⁰ An HIV/AIDS service for the South Asian, Middle East, North African and other excluded communities.

It was difficult for me growing up, feeling constantly ill-fitting, not feeling part of something you should naturally belong to like your Asian community. And then if you don't even possess the traits that are what every Asian girl should be like then it's doubly ill-fitting.

Unpublished interview, May 2000.

Sekhon's experience of feeling ill-fitting in spite of her outward conformity to an ideal of Asian femininity, makes her sensitive to the additional pressure exercised against butch Asian women. As a femme, however, her own experience is not that of uncomplicated pleasure:

one part feels very comfortable with that femme identity but I find myself often trying to be less femme, to butch up in order for people not to dismiss me as frothy or having nothing to say.

Unpublished interview, May 2000.

Femme women often pass for straight (whether we want to or not) but may do so too well. The 'excessive' femininity of our style resembles de Beauvoir's « femme « vraiment femme » » too closely and may trigger more sexism; assumptions about our intelligence or position as "vile and precious merchandise" for the use of men in an erotic economy.

Butch lesbian women face an immediate homophobic hostility. Analysing this antagonism in the context of the always hostile questioning of butch lesbian women using public toilets, the white working-class academic Sally Munt points out:

The question 'Are you a woman?' is a displacement of the unutterable 'Are you a lesbian?'

In Munt (ed.), 1998, p.205.

The discourse of gender fits over the top of a hidden discourse of sexuality. 'Are you a woman?' hides 'Are you a lesbian?'

The painful contradiction of social interpellation which is butch as performative shows the uselessness of analysis which depends on either voluntaristic concepts of individual identity or deterministic theories of social regulation. No one would choose to be butch in the face of such aggressive social disapproval, and butches' resistance to gender stereotypes shows that women can't be forced to be de Beauvoir's ideal, the « femme « vraiment femme » ». The profundity of the difference between femme and straight woman indicates how crucial sexuality is in matters of sex/gender. Femmes complain of the way we become invisible as lesbian unless we are seen with

a butch woman but assert that it is not being with a butch that defines us as femme (see Carolin in Munt, (ed.), 1998). Unlike straight women, femme women are forced to consider where it is that our identification springs from. We can't assume it does so against the "sex"-related masculinity of men³¹ (either present or absent) and may choose partners who are androgynous or also femme, although some of us may be women like Butler's friend, who "likes her boys to be girls" (Butler, 1990, p.123). Havelock Ellis's understanding of butch lesbian women as 'inverts' who love 'real' womanly women and so are 'real' lesbians, is disrupted by the femme. Why should a femme prefer a femme to a 'real' man? Butch and femme expose the way in which heterosexuality is underpinned by an artificial sex/gender conformity, and therefore that it needs underpinning: that it is not 'natural' after all, but only the "universe of the undiscussed" sustained by a universe of gender discourse. As Munt points out, the answer 'yes' to the unutterable 'Are you a lesbian?' would

make the spectre of homosexuality real; it cannot be said ... not just because its perverse dynamic provokes the realization that I am too much like you ... but also because the organizing principle of the space ... insists on no ambiguity. Without gender there is no heterosexuality.

in Munt (ed.), 1998, pp.205-6

I would add, without gender there is no sexuality at all. As Butler (1990, p.124) shows, if opposite sex sex is dependent on a gender distinction, same sex sex is even more so.

During the 1980s, in the "sex wars", radical feminists were arguing that butch/femme relationships mirror heterosexual relationships so completely that they replicate the hetero-normative values which sustain patriarchy. Butler reclaims butch and femme by arguing that in their parody of hetero-normative gender they expose the artificiality of gender as performative in the heterosexual matrix. This comes perilously close to reifying butch, in particular (because butch is more visible), as inherently subversive: the 'enemy within' the heterosexual matrix, a sort of gender guerrilla who just by being disrupts hetero-normativity. As I showed in my critique of Flax's,

³¹ Neither bisexual nor lesbian femmes can imagine definition against men as do straight women.

Haraway's and my own work, it's dangerous to take women's bodies as material for argument instead of their incorporated knowledge. When she walks into a women's toilet, the butch provokes a shocked realisation that gender doesn't naturally follow sex, nor does desire necessarily follow heterosexual regulation. However, as Dollimore remarked, shock isn't enough. It doesn't subvert the heterosexual audience of the butch's transgression into flinging off the shackles of hetero-normativity. Instead, this audience responds with hostility aimed at re-asserting regulation of the butch. Painful experience forces an incorporated knowledge onto the butch, which we can draw on in understanding how intolerant hetero-normativity is of those who don't fit in, and how as Butler argues, it does sometimes put the very human-ness of beings seen as 'excess' into question.

Like the radical feminists who saw butch/femme practices as unwitting replication of patriarchal relations, hooks sees the enactment of the Harlem queens as a kind of false consciousness. The femininity they mimic is white femininity, their longing for the social power they lack simply buys back into a system of patriarchal racist values. Phelan sets this within a psychoanalytic understanding. This is not misogyny but masochism:

Within the film world of Paris walking in a ball is at once a celebration of one's grandest ambitions to charm, seduce, and attract, and an admission that the model one most admires is perennially hostile and impervious to such admiration. Masochism is an integral part of the spectacle; but it cuts both ways. The distance between the model and the walker – what the performance tries to narrow even while necessarily reaffirming – produces violence. The barely contained violence of the balls (voguing itself is described as a "safe" gang war) comes from the profound display of the arbitrariness of this distance.

Phelan, 1993, pp.101-2.

In a more experiential approach, Butler suggests that:

there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality.

Butler, 1993, p.125.

Drag which is working against heterosexuality through reflection on mimesis i.e. utilising an incorporated knowledge, is subversive for Butler.

Phelan's reading of *Paris Is Burning* supports the argument that drag can subvert heterosexuality's "claim on naturalness" by reflecting on its mimetic character:

the camera wanders out of the clubs into the streets of mid-town and finds what normally would appear to be white, heterosexual couples chatting in well-coiffured hair and trim suits.... But realness has become such a fluid term that these heterosexual couples seem exceptionally artificial. In fact, these couples appear to be more "unreal" than the walkers because they remain unaware of the artifice that the walkers have made hyper-visible.

Phelan, 1993, p.103.

Later, Phelan is obliged to reflect on her own racialised gender ontology, comparing her privileged situation to the lack of privilege experienced by a 'man' – Venus Xtravaganza:

In abandoning the dream of being a spoiled white girl I paradoxically confirm the fact that I am spoiled enough and white enough to be able to afford to abandon it.

ibid., p.109.

However, I suggest that Phelan is *choosing* between hostility leading to an attempt to re-regulate drag queens, and the queering of her perspective through an incorporated knowledge which isn't that of her own experience, rather than being forced into or shocked into a queer understanding by confrontation with drag. She chooses to read drag in a positive way, hooks chooses to read drag as negative. Rooted in the specifics of cultural identification and mirroring the workings of hegemonic gender and sexuality in a manner that highlights the artificiality of what we consider to be natural and original, drag and butch and femme transgress the boundaries but that doesn't automatically mean those boundaries are subverted. Drag and butch and femme in heterodox, gay discourse, as opposed to those forms of drag which Butler identifies as performed by heterosexual culture for itself, are heavily punished. hooks criticises *Paris Is Burning* for failing to ask the Harlem queens to speak about family and community beyond the drag balls. In the film Pepper LaBeija speaks about his mother's loathing of his drag outfits and even sheds tears as he describes how she threw out a valuable

mink coat³². Family and community are more important to those for whom they are a refuge against oppressive social forces such as racism or classism. Can it be that hooks could not imagine some people are denied access to such a community? When Dar says:

I do not live in an extended Asian family but instead in a pretend lesbian and gay family that stretches around the world.

Dar, 1998b, p.27,

his words mix pain and pride asserted in the face of pain. The drag queens in *Paris Is Burning* have "houses" with "mothers". The "children" of the "house" of Xtravaganza even get together to buy their "mother" Angie Xtravaganza the operation that will give her breasts. Butler points out that:

the ball is itself an occasion for the building of a set of kinship relations that manage and sustain those who belong to the houses in the face of dislocation, poverty, homelessness

Butler, 1993, p.137.

As drag and butch and femme resignify the terms of the heterosexual matrix, so these kinship relations resignify the terms of community, they are "an appropriation of the terms of domination that turns them towards a more enabling future." (*ibid.*)

But the enabling future remains the future. The resignifying of the terms of sexuality, kinship, community – society, has not yet led to a new order³³. Two thousand years after Martial's epigram it is still an ideal form of masculinity to have a lot of sex, drink a lot, throw up and eat a lot of meat.

Throughout her critique of *Paris Is Burning* bell hooks remains sympathetic to one of the queens: Dorian Carey. At the end of the review, she compares Carey's testimony to the analysis Richard Dyer offers of individualism. Both Carey and Dyer speak of the emulation of "stars", Dyer describing this as an ideal of the individual in capitalism. Consumer capitalism is sustained by the fiction that we are free to buy, to work, to be

³² I don't think this is about the monetary value of the coat. Campaigns have now established the taking and wearing of fur as cruel and immoral. However, mink used to be ranked with diamonds as the mark of a woman who was being kept in a style that enhanced and depended on her beauty: a style in which the queens of *Paris Is Burning* long to be kept (and which includes the being kept; hooks is right when she notices that we aren't in any realm of drag feminism).

³³ Instead we have conformative gay male politicians supporting the Third Way. Unspecified "social values" are an insufficient basis for politics; even if "social values" were not precisely the regulative framework which keeps us trapped in the heterosexual matrix.

who we please. For hooks, Carey's figure of the queens aspiring to be stars shows how drag is complicit in the processes of an individualist consumer capitalism, rather than reflecting in its transgressions the artificiality of the heterosexual matrix.

Drag, butch and femme experience do undermine the concept of freedom in consumer capitalism, showing up the power of interpellation against individual freedom of choice. However, drag queens, femmes and butches are also obliged to be complicit in discursive matrices of power. Whether we transgress them or fit them, we can never – no one can – step outside them. It's only within social discourse that we can 'do' ourselves. The sublime pleasure of matching a social performance to the individual performative, and the extraordinary cruelty with which excessive gender identification is punished and abjected are matched only by the tenacity of those who are called against social regulation and who continue to fit ourselves in somehow.

The photographer/artist Poulomi has included images of Asian drag queens in her corpus of work for over ten years. Poulomi grew up in London, did A levels in science (while setting up a self-organised artists' group), took a year out and never went back to take up her place reading biotechnology "for some queer reason".

My mother never wanted me to do science anyway, so that was my rebellion. My dad wanted me to be a philosopher. My mother wanted me to be an artist.

Unpublished interview, May 2000.

The support of her mother (a poet actively involved in campaigns for women's rights) has been crucial to Poulomi. She can usually be seen at Poulomi's private views, proudly examining the glittering miniature of a drag queen's bejewelled foot or a blown-up shot of two old women with "Asian babes" reflected in their irises.

In 1987, Poulomi bought a house with fellow Shakti members in Southall, and was encouraged to take up photography by Sunil Gupta. But even someone so buttressed by familial and community support says:

I've always felt I never fitted in – because of my upbringing, my background.

Unpublished interview, May 2000.

Reflecting on the accusations of misogyny directed towards Asian drag queens at Shakti club nights, Poulomi argues for a deeper understanding of the cultural histories of drag.

Some of the feminists saw [drag] as a piss-take of women. The problem was that the ones who were most vocal had absolutely no concept of the history of men dressing up as women – whether from the Shakespearean angle [or from the Asian theatre perspective].

[The drag queens] used to dance and people would put money in their blouses. They were copying the mujra³⁴ in a way but they were undermining it because they were men. They weren't pretending to be anything-else. [Some of them were imitating exaggerated fantasies of film stars rather than 'real' mujra.] Some of the women were going really mad about that, saying it's taking the piss out of mujra and the fact that they were prostitutes and I would say: Do you go and see bharatnatyam and kathak? Why do you support those, it's coming out of the same tradition.

Unpublished interview, May 2000.

When I asked Poulomi why she takes photos of drag queens, she said:

Oh, I'm just an ageing Liberace drag queen trapped in a bisexual Asian [woman's] body! I'd be a drag queen if I could.

Unpublished interview, May 2000.

She talked throughout our interview about drag as performance and her love for the purposive dressing up of drag. I asked if it was like dressing up with other women to go out to a party.

The dressing up wasn't like girly dressing up for me – it was a performance. You were going to somewhere to do something. Girly dressing up – it wasn't a phantasm you were creating, a fantastical being.

Unpublished interview, May 2000.

She described queens for whom drag is "the essence of their being". When she talked about drag as performance, she qualified this by explaining that it is "purposive". For Poulomi, drag queens are not iconic figures (mis-)representing particular gender positions, rather they are people struggling to "do" gender with the same material we all have to hand. Her show *From the coffee table to the kit(s)chen* showed drag queens and older women, all with the iconic figures of Bollywood actors and actresses floating in their irises. I suggest that, as hooks notices, cross-dressing is a ritual, but that this is

³⁴ Dancing girls, who might also be selling sexual favours.

because wearing clothes in general isn't performance but ritual. It becomes more obviously 'special' when the wearing of clothes transgresses social expectation but the doctor's white coat, the bride's white dress, the drag queen's sequined gown, the femme's high heeled shoes, the butch's Ben Sherman shirt, the man's Ben Sherman shirt are all symbolic realms drawing on tradition, in which identity is generated and iterated.

Dar remarks:

The idea that to be transgressive one had to be *avant-garde* died in the Sixties. Frederic Jameson describes the current capitalist situation as an economic world order that appropriates, incorporates and consumes transgression into chic, so to be an Asian drag queen on the performance circuit may not be seen as a transgressive act, for it too could be viewed as fetishizing an identity for momentary consumption.

Dar, 1998a, p.25 (Dar's italics).

Mercer takes Coco Fusco's point that in the 1980s film scene, the Other was 'in', he asks whether this was "merely another voguish trend to be itemized on the shopping list of the art world consumer" (Mercer, 1994, p.94). Crucially, those who do drag, butch and femme continue to do so whether we are abjected, fetishised or accepted as 'normal'. There is a huge pleasure in performing gender as performative when we are allowed to. It feels so real. But we are obliged to fit our performances (those actual enactments of an ideal competence which are full of mistakes) into the spaces offered or left for us by hegemonic workings of power: whether that be a repudiated Outsider-figure we can occupy with self-loathing, or with ironic pride, or a momentarily chic fetishistic Outsider-figure. In the compulsive search for the pleasure of identification, boundaries may be crossed and the incorporated knowledge we gain in that crossing may make clear the need for change, may even – if we can translate it for those in a position of power – provide some of the impetus towards change, but I think actual change will have to come from elsewhere.

5.7 Conclusion

Initially working through a critique of different feminist schools of thought, I examined here how the question of race – central in feminism since de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*, has been managed in academic theory. Where concepts of identity are reified in the bodies of black (or working class)

women, analysis of identification replicates politically problematic hegemonic thinking. Black feminist standpoint epistemologies escape this trap by working from an incorporated knowledge of personal experience. Recently, some feminist thinkers have succeeded in tackling the question of race by a laborious distancing process, as opposed to the lazy distancing which scientific objectivity, like that used in classic social anthropological studies, manages to achieve via practices of racism and sexism. Stepping back into arenas similar to the arena of performance utilised by my participants, queer theorists cease to focus on reified Outsider-figures for the analysis of race, class and gender politics and instead draw out relationships which produce identification: usually in the form of Derridean supplementarity.

The categories drag, butch and femme remain in danger of reification at moments in these analyses. Returning to accounts of experience and performance which consider drag, butch and femme shows that they are performative gender processes, subjectivated (and therefore subjected) in diverse cultural forms in all classes. While the incorporated knowledge which drag, butch and femme experience offers can show up the need for subversion of cruelly – sometimes murderous – conscriptive and constrictive discourse supporting matrices of power, drag, butch and femme aren't in themselves subversive. The potential for subversion can be signalled but can't be acted on by those who don't have power. In addition, drag, butch and femme don't operate in a separate economy. We must trade what cultural capital we possess in the same sex/gender economy (as Rubin calls it) as everyone-else.

Chapter Six

Valerie Mason-John aka Queenie – Studies of Race and Class.

« Tiens, un nègre! » C'était un stimulus extérieurement qui me chiquenaudait en passant. J'esquissai un sourire.

...
« Maman, regarde le nègre, j'ai peur! » Peur! Peur! Voilà qu'on se mettait à me craindre. Je voulus m'amuser jusqu'à m'étouffer, mais cela m'était devenu impossible.

Frantz Fanon, 1952, p.90.¹

Ce livre a son lieu de naissance dans un texte de Borges. Dans le rire qui secoue à sa lecture toutes les familiarités de la pensée – de la nôtre: de celle qui a notre âge et notre géographie – ebranlant toutes les surfaces ordonnées et tous les plans qui assagissent pour nous le foisonnement des êtres, faisant vaciller et inquiétant pour longtemps notre pratique millénaire du Même et de l'Autre.

Michel Foucault, 1966, p.7.²

The understanding of the operation of hegemonic discourse is crucial to an understanding of the politics of race, gender, sexuality, class, (dis)ability. Preceding chapters have shown the constitution of an Outsider-figure through hidden supplementary relations, the way in which a matrix of power, or *doxa* is hidden by a discourse which it also contains, and the strategy double-voiced discourse which will allow those “muted” in *doxa* to speak about their situation. Chapter Five has described how feminist theories can incorporate thinking about race politics, emphasising a need to respect a multiplicity of identities rather than reify particular subject positions.

In *The Black The White and The Blue*, the matrices of power producing ‘race’ and ‘sexuality’ are brought together in a deconstructive context which exposes their workings. As a rule, however, matrices of power work together to hide and reinforce each other. Here I will develop a discussion of theories

¹ “Look, a Negro!” It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile. ... “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. (Trans., Markham, 1986, pp.111-2.)

² “This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought - *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography - breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continued long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.” (Foucault, 1970, p.xv. Translator’s italics.)

of class politics. I will examine the way in which processes of race and class hide each other's workings in a performance piece by Valerie Mason-John, *Brown Girl in the Ring*. During my previous chapter class politics was increasingly coming up in the discussion of how to respect race politics in gender studies. To situate my analysis, I offer first an account of Mason-John's life and secondly an account of how academic studies of race in Britain have engaged with the issues of class. This will help develop an approach which encompasses thinking about more than one vector of power. Mason-John was a central figure in 'queer' discourse of the 1990s and I continue an exploration of queer through my accounts of her life and work.

When she was interviewed in Dionne St Hill's diary in *The Voice*, July 1996, Valerie Mason-John aka Queenie said: "I want to be the first Black gay icon this country has". She was about to become the first black person to co-host the main stage at Gay Pride, and she had co-written and edited the first two books on British black lesbian culture. I always feel puzzled by her remark: the public expression of wanting to be a public figure which achieves itself (a performative masquerading as a constative statement). By July 1996 Mason-John was already iconic, towering over the gay scene and now pictured in Britain's foremost black newspaper. To be interviewed would have been one thing, to be photographed and self-identified as lesbian in the black press, while living, shopping, socialising in an area of high black settlement was an act of bravery more wealthy and better protected public figures are still failing to achieve³. There is something odd happening here. Most people about to co-host the main stage at a festival for thousands of people from all over Britain, who had published two ground-breaking books and were set en route for a t.v. career would not be unsure of their iconic status. However, for someone from a 'minority interest' community, fame, reknown or simple acknowledgement will never be straightforward. Mason-John can tower over the gay scene, be consistently reviled in *Time Out* reviews but be unknown in cultural circles dominated by heterosexist and white values, where her work may be regarded as irrelevant. Becoming famous in such circles in a manner

³ An act of bravery not because people in black communities are more homophobic but because more of them read the black press.

which commands serious respect will not be easy for someone whose field of work will be designated either titillation or political correctness. As Dar and Mercer show in their reflections on voyeuristic chic, those who work in these areas must be wary of how we make our way. We can't take every opportunity to advance our careers but must scrutinise each chance to make sure it doesn't lead to some dead end where we are identified with chat-show sexuality or dull, 'heavy' and excessive politics.

In the photo accompanying St Hill's piece, Mason-John is ultra-femme, contradicting the stereotyped image of the black lesbian as butch 'bulldagger'. She is dressed in a chic zebra-striped coat and sun-glasses, glossed lips pouted. Transgressing social oppressions and restrictions, exploring and exploding myths and taboos, Mason-John was part of queer 1990s Britain and the way in which the concept of queer sought to blend politics and pleasure in an ethics surpassing liberal humanism.

Mason-John was one of the most powerful presences on the British black gay scene of the 1990s. Her appearances in the early '90s at the lesbian club *Venus Rising*, dancing in a dildo and dancing in a cage, caused ripples of argument and commentary. The publication of the two books she co-wrote and edited on British black lesbian culture provoked the relief and frustration of mainstream acknowledgement and prejudice. Her play *Sin Dykes*, presented at Oval House in 1997, explored not one but two taboo topics: black/white relationships and S/M practice on the black lesbian scene.

I met her in 1992 when I moved into a lesbian house-share where one of the women (white Scottish/Swedish) was a close friend of hers. She was researching her first book, *Lesbians Talk: Making Black Waves*, which she wrote with Ann Khambatta, and which was published as part of their *Lesbians Talk* series by the feminist publishers Scarlet Press in 1993. She was working as a journalist but living what in other times might have been defined 'another', a 'double' life:

even I have to admit that freelancing for the mainstream media including The Guardian and writing for The Voice during the day, while working at night as a go-go dancer, clad in top hat, tails and a strap-on dildo at what was Europe's biggest women only club in London, Venus Rising, was perhaps a little incongruous.

I hasten to add that while many black women shook my hand on the night of my donning a strap-on, and confessed they had one (I hadn't the heart to say actually this was borrowed), they were more concerned about me and another black woman dancing behind bars, which they perceived to be a cage. For us, it was a great opportunity to dance the chaos, bouncing and swinging off the bars.

Mason-John, 1999, p. 21.

I was told that Mason-John was going to be dancing in a dildo at *Venus Rising* in hushed tones that made it clear it was likely to cause a scandal. This was the end of the 1980s, an era when radical feminism had liberated women but into another, a sort of inverted repression for the lesbian community. Penetrative sex, butch/femme identities and many forms of glamour such as make-up, high heels and other trappings of femininity, had been fiercely repudiated in radical feminist, including lesbian feminist, circles. Valerie Mason-John was part of a new era, a queer age, in which a politics of pleasure held sway. This was the "sex wars" battlefield. Queer politics was rising, but other, older schools of thought mingled and clashed with the new stream. Anti-racist women who wanted to enjoy sexual freedom were still anxious about the echos of a history of slavery in the practices of sado-masochism. Black women felt liberated by seeing a black woman wear a dildo in public, but worried by her being put in a cage above a crowd of predominantly white women.

I got to know Mason-John better as I began writing reviews and articles for the gay press. In 1994, she asked me to write the chapter on British black lesbian literature for her forthcoming collection of essays *Talking Black: Lesbians of African and Asian Descent Speak Out*. This was my first piece of serious scholarly work and the research I did inspired me to write this thesis. We continue to meet and exchange views, to pass on contacts: black women academics for me, new performers for Mason-John in her current role working with the annual Gay Pride arts festivals.

6.1 Early life

Mason-John has written openly about her early life in her book *Brown Girl in the Ring*. A biography issued at the time of its publication summarises a background bristling with difficulties:

Abandoned at 6 weeks old, raised in several white foster homes until the age of 5, placed in Barnardos until the age of 11, living on the streets at 13, Valerie Mason-John aka Queenie is a unique, provocative character who has become known as one of 'Britain's Black Gay Icons'.

Oval House press release for performance of *Brown Girl in the Ring*, January 1999.

At the same time, the biography emphasises the strengths of the person who has successfully come through many problems. It would be unpardonable to come to her history as if Mason-John were simply a victim of some of the most brutal social forces in today's Britain: homophobia, racism, the tangle of childcare policy for those not from a white heterosexual two parent family. I am hoping here to do as Mason-John does: record those forces and their effects on her while celebrating what she has achieved. Part of what Mason-John has achieved has been done in her books through a frank account of her experiences which reveal slips in humanity from careless inconsistency to cruelty and hypocrisy. Mason-John's tone in revealing these sides to our society is measured. It's clear that people are at fault but even at their worst we can see that they are also human.

Accounts in *Brown Girl in the Ring* describe the physical abuse inflicted on Mason-John by her biological mother in a muddle of racism:

She tries to beat the white out of me.
Mason-John, 1999, p. 9,

but also an understanding that her mother is mentally ill rather than inhuman. Mason-John describes her imprisonment aged 15 for the negligible crime of shop-lifting, in a racist society incapable of sympathising with the difficulties of those who have been brought up in care. She talks about the racism and homophobia she has suffered and the particular struggles of living with both:

I used to think I had no 'coming out' issues. I had fallen in love aged 17 with a woman and wanted to tell the whole world. I had no black parent to confess to, and because I had grown up in institutions, and with white families, I was able to assimilate on the scene and feel a familiarity. Of course I regretted this, I thought I was missing out on a drama, I was envious of my black women friends who were happily out to their families.

However, as I write this book, I realise that coming out for me on the black lesbian scene was traumatic, and that I most definitely had a 'coming out' story to tell.

Mason-John, 1999, p. 21.

Mason-John was labelled weird. She was viewed as someone who had sold out by dating 'the enemy' (white women), yet she was expected by both white and black to provide positive representation of black issues in the (white) gay press, gay issues in the (straight) black press.

Some parts of the black gay communities have practised separatist politics either by a more positive support for black on black relationships, or by a more cruel condemnation of black on white relationships. As Mason-John points out (Mason-John, 1999, p.25), the development of a vocabulary including terms like 'Snow Queen' (a black man who is only attracted to white men) or 'Rice Queen' (a white man who is only attracted to Pacific Asian men) highlights how much of an issue mixed race relationships are to black gay communities. Her own experience is one of being savaged by gossip simply for her relationships with white women. The part of the book about lesbian culture and politics of the '80s and '90s is called "Publish and be damned":

In 1997 I told one of my African-Caribbean lesbian friends (who dates white women) that I had written a poem about loving white women, she said: "Publish and be damned."

Mason-John, 1999, p. 23.

Mason-John has also been savaged by some sections of the white gay communities. Like Linda Bellos, she received rough handling from those who liked to think of themselves as allies on the political front (see Chapter Three). Her edited collection *Talking Black* – the first collection of British black lesbian writing – was slammed in *Time Out* in a review which complained of black lesbians collecting in groups at clubs and making the (white) reviewer feel excluded.

6.2 Political writing: journalism and popular scholarship

Aged twenty, Mason-John went to Leeds University to read Psychology, planning to train as a barrister. Rapidly tiring of the racism and homophobia of the course, she changed to Philosophy and History. While at Leeds, she started their first women's magazine *Jezebel*. Involvement in political actions led to arrests, ruining her chances at the Bar. Uncertainty about what she wanted to do and ill health made her decide to leave without

completing her degree but she says the time at Leeds has influenced the ways in which she studies, reads and debates.

She started her professional career as a journalist, working in the late '80s as a feature writer for *The Voice*, publishing articles in *The Guardian* and also the gay press, feminist magazines and *City Limits*. In 1988, she left Britain and went to work in Australia. She had gone through the rigorous application process for a BBC job and had come second:

When you free-lance you can afford to have politics, when you work in a system you have to compromise.

Unpublished interview, September 1994.

Mason-John is not someone who can compromise.

She describes this as a time when she needed to discover who she was. Documenting the indigenous struggle over land rights "made me aware of what colonisation has done. Colonisation is so new there. It made me aware that I am a product of colonisation." (Unpublished interview, February 2000.) Mason-John lived in traditional ways with an Aborigine community. She describes this experience as completely changing her life, which up till then had been very materialistic.

The period in Australia seems to have been a watershed in her life in many ways. She once remarked to me:

Before [I went to Australia], I used to pass in the white community. I knew how to toe the line and when I'm around white people I can be more English than the English

Unpublished interview, July 1996.

This does not mean Mason-John has not always had a clear sense of the political. The pressure of prejudice from outside lends an additional force to the personal drive to understand processes of identification for those who are black or gay or women. Unless we work at maintaining false consciousness, we have to understand how we are being treated – or go under. Mason-John has explicitly connected her early ambition to be a barrister with a desire to be an active part of the fight for justice:

I've got all these school reports that say 'Valerie is defender and champion of the underdog'.

Unpublished interview, September 1994.

As a kid I was called Defender of the Underdog and I take that Defender of the Underdog in to my work. Hence a lot of my

journalism was always about the underdog – trans-racial care, Nicaragua, South Africa or whatever, all about these oppressed people.

When I made a decision to work for the gay press, it was very much about taking time out from the mainstream. But I would try and redress the balance for women's coverage and black coverage and that was an uphill struggle, it didn't happen. I enjoyed working for the gay press but on another level I found it so frustrating around racism. Also, because I've been somebody who's been visible in the community, I've worked for *The Voice* so when you start working for *The Pink Paper*, people expect you to cover their issues – that was tremendous pressure on me.

Unpublished interview, July 1996.

There are several points I want to tease out here about how and why Mason-John's work is 'political'. Firstly, she refers to concepts of justice, morality and goodness originating in childhood. The discourse of childhood: adults' admonitions, children's stories, have a clear and simple creed of right and wrong. It may sometimes be difficult to make out the right thing to do but a 'good' (and therefore loveable) child should be willing to put some effort into doing so. In children's novels, even if the hero/ine makes mistakes, if s/he tries hard s/he will usually win through in the end. Selflessness, not taking advantage of those weaker than oneself, and standing up for the underdog against stronger kids if necessary (but not against adults – the arbiters of right and wrong), are held up as of significant value in childhood discourse. These are values we often strive to carry into, and act on in, the murkier and more complex world of adulthood. Championing the cause of oppressed peoples, especially in indifferent or prejudiced milieu, may be partly a continuation of the moral work begun in childhood. This may be particularly the case for girls, who are encouraged from early on to think of others in a way which will generate us as ideal, caring wives and mothers.

There are ways in which for someone like Mason-John this work can also be about a political self-development. Work in these areas offers access to resources and space in which to think through matters which are personally vital as well as of a wider political significance. (This is the case for me with my own thesis, for example.) Mason-John remarks that working for the gay press was time out for her. I would understand her to mean that the work provided her with an arena in which for once she didn't have to think about

her sexuality: lesbian was normal, and that while she was still being challenged by racism and the need for more coverage of women's and black interests, there may also have been an acceptance that these should be covered as opposed to a crass attitude that any extra effort for the positive representation of women or black people is an unnecessary absurdity. Working in a political field which may also be one of self-interest is complicated, however, by the very childhood discourse which encourages us to stand up for the oppressed. This discourse offers a split subjectivity in the rescuer/victim dynamic. There is rarely a victim who empowers h/erself; someone-else must kiss the sleeping princess or fight off the class bully. Standing up for one's own interests may seem to conflict with the ideal of selflessness in childhood morality.

Thirdly, however, the quote suggests one is often pushed into political kinds of work by an unwarranted assumption that if you are a woman, black, lesbian, you must work in certain areas: "people expect you to cover their issues". There is a "burden of representation" placed on Mason-John, as there is on Patience Agbabi, by members of particular communities who expect her to act on her personal understanding of their situations. In addition, if we are members of those particular communities, it can be difficult to be commissioned for work that is not in those areas. As we are given more of this work, we necessarily become more expert at it and less expert in other fields, and end up justifying editors' choice of our work on professional as well as on the unwarranted personal grounds.

The only reason I didn't get into serious reporting was because of politics.

Unpublished interview, July 1996.

There may be opportunities to work in fields of personal interest, there are also often barriers to working outside those narrowly defined fields; fields of interest defined for us by others.

Following her 1993 collaboration on *Making Black Waves*, the publishing house Cassell⁴ commissioned Mason-John to produce the edited

⁴ Cassell are publishers mainly of educational books. At this time they were specifically commissioning popular scholarly works for a lesbian/gay/queer list. They produced a very extensive list of books of variable quality, which nevertheless meant representation for some key areas which had previously been invisible.

collection *Talking Black*, which was published in 1995. *Brown Girl in the Ring*, published in 1999, seems in many ways the culmination of a shift away from an initial period of political writing in journalism and popular works of scholarship:

'Brown Girl in the Ring' is a book about everything I really wanted to say in my first two books, but censored myself because it was more important that both African and Asian lesbians had a book that belonged to them,
Mason-John, 1999, p. 21.

I have remarked on a shift in black writing, away from representation by one member of a whole community, towards working with a mosaic of voices, each of which adds to the picture of a community of individuals⁵. *Brown Girl in the Ring* is written as a solo voice rather than a mosaic of voices such as *Talking Black* might be seen to be. It could therefore be seen as more characteristic of the genre of work being presented in the '80s and early '90s. However, in it Mason-John almost immediately refuses to take up that technique of using her self to represent a community (the "burden of representation"), which was characteristic of the '80s and early '90s work:

I can only really write from my own perspective ... while I refer to the experience of other black women, it is only in reference to my immediate experience.
Mason-John, 1999, p. 1.

6.3 A career in performance

In the mid 1990s Mason-John began more seriously to develop her career in performance. In our interview in 1994, she was saying:

Performing has always been a hobby. It's like, I was always attracting attention in night clubs so why not get paid for it! but I've always earned my living through print and broadcast: journalism, writing, research.

Unpublished interview, September 1994.

By now she is better known as a performer than a writer, in spite of her three publications and many newspaper articles.

⁵ "Self and Other in Performed Narrative in the British Gay and Diaspora Communities." Pacific-Asia Cultural Studies Forum seminar, Goldsmiths College, University of London, November 1997.

She attended the Desmond Jones School of Physical Theatre and Mime and a clowning skills workshop given by Angela de Castro. She began appearing in documentary and feature films as a presenter and an actor; and in stage shows in London's fringe theatres. She became involved with Talawa Theatre Group in 1998. She hosted poetry events, the Lesbian Beauty contest⁶ and a Drag King contest. (After 1996, it would be Queenie rather than Valerie who was hosting the events.)

In 1996, as part of the performance night following Lois Weaver's "O Solo Mio" workshops, Valerie presented a piece then called *sweep it under the carpet*. It was billed as "written by Valerie Mason-John and performed by queenie". A short scene in which an upper-class black woman and a waiter inter-act, cut by interjections of "sweep it under the carpet!", this was to grow into the one-woman show *Brown Girl in the Ring* (a script of which is published in the book of the same name).

6.4 Queenie

Queenie is more than simply a stage name. In our 1994 interview, Mason-John remarked:

Mime is about finding you, finding your clown.
Unpublished interview, September 1994.

Louise Carolin's account of Angela de Castro (in Rapi and Chowdhry (ed.s), 1998) makes clear that the clown persona must be regarded as a separate being, s/he is not like a character in a play. In the following account, from an unpublished interview I conducted in 1996, Mason-John mostly refers to her performance using 'I' ("I go out and I'm doing drag") but also speaks as of another entity: "It was this lesbian who looked absolutely amazing." She says that the name 'Queenie'

really came from the States, when I was in San Fran, covering Pride a couple of years ago. The gay boys started calling me Queenie, like 'You're a bigger Queen than us'. ... Although it was white gay men who gave me this name, Queenie is very much a Black identified name. Queenie for me – because I've been established as a writer, a journalist ever since I came out of education, and I was very well-established in the Black

⁶ She has been attacked in the press from the time she took over the Lesbian Beauty contest, by the former hostess white American femme Amy Lamé and supporters of Lamé.

media. And in the Black media and the gay media, Valerie Mason-John is very much known as a serious writer so I thought 'Well, as a performer it's very hard for people to change and think well, no, Valerie Mason-John is this different persona'. So this year I launched 'Queenie'.

...

Some people [lesbians] call me a lesbian drag queen. I think 'Yeah' when this phenomena of drag kings came out – why does a drag king have to be someone who emanates a male persona? Because there's times when I go out and I'm doing drag – when I wear a seventeenth century wig and a ballgown, I'm doing drag. It was this lesbian who looked absolutely amazing, I'd beat any drag queen out there but I was very obviously a dyke.

...

Have drag queens influenced me? No, because I was never somebody who went out to watch drag. In fact I found drag quite misogynistic. As a kid it was always dressing up. Clothes for school, clothes for play and clothes for parties. Sometimes in a day I'll get changed four times and I'll laugh at myself.

I'm influenced by women. I remember when I wore that Georgian dress. But I laughed when I put that dress on because I had to wear a bustle to make my bottom big. What were those women doing? They were emanating Black women. It's about playing and having fun.

Unpublished interview, July 1996.

Queenie is not a woman dragging up in imitation of drag queens. What Mason-John is arguing is that it is possible for a woman to drag up as a woman. (Mason-John doesn't say so, but this type of drag is probably closer to 'high femme'⁷ practice than to drag queens.) This is the "purposive" performance which the photographer Poulomi finds so compelling about drag and which I argue is ritual rather than performance. Mason-John's account suggests that it's possible for a black woman to drag up as a white woman signifying black womanliness, as when Mason-John (/Queenie?) puts on the bustle that white women of the Georgian era used to "emanate Black women". Her account fits Butler's argument about the subversive potential of drag, butch and femme. She develops the idea that drag, butch and femme are copies of copies in a racialised context. Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* argues that racialised economies and philosophies are foundational to the project of modernity. Mason-John suggests a racialised reference was made

in eighteenth century fashion. As Donoghue has shown, 'foreign parts' have always been a repository for excess sexuality (see Chapter Three). It seems plausible that women of an era when undercurrents of slavery sustained white English society would reference the exotic big bottom of black women like the 'Hottentot Venus' (c. 1810).

Mason-John laughs when she puts on the Georgian dress. This is no longer the sketch of a smile, the attempt at amusement which is Fanon's response to a child's fear of the negro (Fanon, 1952, p.90). It is the laughter which Bakhtin describes as excluded from official ideology and erupting in carnival to reference a Heraclitian concept of flux (Bakhtin, 1965, p.82). It is a laugh which opens up the situation from a queer understanding. It is Foucault's laugh in response to Borges's fictional taxonomy (Foucault, 1966, p.7). A smile is only a response. A laugh exposes a situation: possibly to ridicule, perhaps to a warm, affectionate understanding. Mason-John copies the style of women who copied black women's big bottoms. But even though she is 'really' a black woman, she too has to artificially enlarge her bottom with a bustle: so false and so enormous is the symbolic representation of the white women's copy. Their copy is not of something we can locate as an empirical reality, there is no 'real' sexy big black woman's bottom, only the copy of an ideal which still makes women's lives a misery when they are identified by it as a source of primal sexiness rather than private sexuality⁸.

6.5 Race and class in the sociology of race relations

Before I move on to an analysis of race and class dynamics in Mason-John's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, I will summarise the way in which academic studies have attempted to manage these two vectors of power. I will also offer an account of representations of class and race in British culture: the context in which we can better understand Mason-John's work.

⁷ 'High femme' is a style adopted by some lesbian women which is more feminine than straight women's style: high, even stiletto, heels, low-cut cleavage, lacey dresses, bouffant or long hair styles.

⁸ There is an absolute difference between the objectifying gaze of lascivious interest in primal sexiness and the respectful admiration of a fellow subject's private sexuality. There is nothing wrong with exciting the former, provided it has been deliberately done. It is wrong when it has been uninvited.

The sociology of race relations in Britain was originally composed of studies of interaction between groups of immigrant and local white populations, with little theoretical perspective. Racism as a concept came into use with the rise of National Socialism in Germany. In the 1960s, interest was growing in the theoretical study of migration and settlement, and in the 1970s discussion of race and ethnicity in the terms of Marxism. (Solomos, 1993.)

Gilroy (Gilroy, 1987) describes three different strands of thought in a Marxist-dominated sociology of race relations. He sees all of them as problematic, either subsuming race as an 'under-class' (Rex and Tomlinson) or 'sub-proletariat' (Sivinandan); or treating race as solely an economic situation (Miles), ignoring the cultural history of black communities in which a black bourgeoisie and working class have on occasion drawn together in what Richard Wright called "a tradition, in fact a kind of culture" (cited, Gilroy, 1987, p.25); or arguing that race has no continuity at all with class politics (Gabriel and Ben-Tovin). Gilroy's is perhaps the first analysis of race to draw on a Foucauldian frame of thought. (It should be borne in mind that he works in cultural studies, which has its own epistemology based in a study of class cultures. The work of both foundational figures Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams is geared to bringing out an understanding of hitherto invisibilised popular working-class cultures; Williams's work within an explicitly Marxist theoretical frame.)

Gilroy seeks to break with these static orders in a world of economic relations and phenomenal forms:

The primary problems for analysis of racial antagonism which occurs within the broad framework of historical materialism must be the manner in which racial meanings, solidarity and identities provide the basis for action.

Gilroy, 1987, p.27.

Although he is not pretending that race is detached from economic relations of power:

The forms of economic coercion involved in, for example, plantation slavery, migrant labour and apartheid, are all important reminders of the fact that 'race' can become a distinctive feature at the level of economic development.

Gilroy, 1987, p.38.

So successful was this strategy that by 1990 (“One nation under a groove ...”), Gilroy had to turn the argument around and plead for us to take note of economic factors in the study of race relations:

The intimate association between ideas about race and the employment of unfree labour in plantation slavery, ‘debt peonage’, apartheid or the coercive use of migrant labour should be a constant warning against conceptualizing racial ideologies as if they are wholly autonomous.

Gilroy, 1990, (reprinted in Gilroy, 1993b) p.20.

Unlike feminists tackling the question of race, Gilroy doesn’t need to emphasise the importance of relations (dynamics) in constituting race identity rather than reified subject positions, an emphasis on relations is axiomatic in Marxism. However, identifying “the manner in which racial meanings, solidarity and identities provide the basis for action” suggests a shift to a more semiological understanding (one which might be sympathetic to Derridean theory).

Gilroy puts forward Stuart Hall’s argument for the historical specificity of racisms – an explicitly Marxist perspective, tempering his argument for:

a critical distance from positivist and productivist Marxian and neo-Marxian approaches which risk the reduction of ‘race’ to a mystical conception of class as well as those which have buried the specific qualities of racism in the difficulties surrounding the analysis of ideology in general Yet Marxism understood in Richard Wright’s phrase as a ‘transitory makeshift pending a more accurate diagnosis’ can provide some valuable points of departure.

Gilroy, 1990, (reprinted in Gilroy, 1993b) p.21.

(The question of the specificities of racisms is one which has been thoroughly explored by Avtar Brah particularly in *Cartographies of Diaspora*.)

In “One nation under a groove ...” Gilroy goes on to speak of a “crisis ... *lived* through a sense of ‘race’” (p.23, Gilroy’s italics), echoing Stuart Hall:

This is not a crisis *of* race. But race punctuates and periodises it. Race is the lens through which people come to perceive that a crisis is developing. It is the framework through which the crisis is experienced. It is the means by which the crisis is to be resolved – ‘send it away’.

Hall, 1978, pp.31-2.

As I discussed in detail in Chapter Three, race can be figured through symbolic Outsider-figures in political discourse. Race can be referenced as discourse that hides the operations of other vectors of power.

Gilroy offers two examples of the way in which class may cross-cut race: one negative, one positive, balancing out the suggestion he made in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* that race may cross over class divisions. He describes the way in which trans-racial fostering became an issue of political contention for a black bourgeoisie committed to an absolutist conception of black culture needing to be passed to the precious resource of children as the future community⁹. He also describes the high level of support for striking miners in the late 1980s from Britain's black communities, seeing this as:

a preliminary but nonetheless concrete answer to the decisive political question of our age: how do we act locally and yet think globally? How do we connect the local and the immediate across the earthworks erected by the division of labour?

Gilroy, 1990, (reprinted in Gilroy 1993b) p.48.

Les Back's study describes communities which are both black and white working class. He shows young black people aware that their white peers do better economically (Back, 1996, p.169). He also describes young black people both aspiring to a college education and middle class culture and recognising limitations to it:

If I talk to them the way I'm talking now and they come back with their educated accent, then I turn round and come back with the Jamaican bit, they'd come back with something and it would sound kind of limp [laugh].

Michael, quoted, Back, 1996, p.154.

Here it's felt that the black bourgeoisie have lost a certain cultural richness. (I would add, however, that Michael asserts this defensively in the face of someone who he sees as 'coming back' at him with an educated voice.)

For Back, there are three forms of "social context" which affect identity formation. An immediate context is based around an individual, their group, a particular situation. Secondly, there are what J.C. Turner calls "referent informational influences": class, race, community cultures, ideologies, discourse. Thirdly, there are social and economic factors such as local

⁹ Wittig's description of women as "vile and precious merchandise" comes to mind.

housing settlement patterns. Back's "social contexts" bear a strong resemblance to Bourdieu's concept of 'fields' controlling *habitus*.

Marxist thinking in one way or another prioritises class: either placing race or gender under class relations in the analysis of social forces or subsuming them as kinds of class. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* does allow for the analysis of identification practices other than class: either as modulating class relations or as being modulated by questions of class¹⁰:

Deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their consistency over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms. This system of dispositions – a present past which tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices, an internal law through which the law of external necessities, irreducible to immediate constraints, is constantly exerted – is the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism sees in social practices without being able to account for it; and also of the regulated transformations that cannot be explained either by the extrinsic, instantaneous determinisms of mechanistic sociology or by the purely but equally instantaneous determinism of spontaneist subjectivism

Bourdieu, cited Robson, 1998, pp.21-2.

Robson draws on the concept of *habitus* to understand the white working-class masculinity of Millwall football fan-dom. He finds Marxist and Weberian thinking on class too limited to understand "lives which combine relative material wealth with grotesque-realist expressive dispositions and forms of embodiment" (Robson, 1998, p.329). Beverley Skeggs works with Bourdieu's concept of four different kinds of capital:

1. Economic capital: this includes income, wealth, financial inheritances and monetary assets.
2. Cultural capital: this can exist in three forms – in an embodied state, that is in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods; and in the institutionalized state, resulting in such things as educational qualifications. The discourses of femininity and masculinity become embodied and can be used as cultural resources. This is not to say that gendered relations are purely cultural. They are not. Cultural capital only exists in relation to the

¹⁰ I am disagreeing here with Moore's critique that Bourdieu's *habitus* is overdetermined by class. (Moore, 1993, p.178).

network of other forms of capital. Gender carries different amounts of symbolic capital in different contexts.

3. Social capital: resources based on connections and group membership. This is capital generated through relationships.
4. Symbolic capital: this is the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate. Legitimation is the key mechanism in the conversion to power. Cultural capital has to be regarded as legitimate before it can be capitalized upon. All capitals are context specific. Thus people are distributed in the overall social space according to: the global *volume* of capital they possess; the *composition* of their capital, the relative weight in their overall capital of the various forms of capital and evolution in time of the volume and composition according to their *trajectory* in social space.

Skeggs, 1997, p.8.

She shows how working-class women aspire to a middle-class ideal in an attempt to become 'respectable'; how they trade with limited resources – they have little in the way of capital to convert to gain material reward. Bourdieu's four forms of capital are useful in understanding Michael's situation which I quoted from Back's study above. The "educated accent" is cultural capital but Michael can counter its investment in the conversation with "the Jamaican bit". He utilises something out of the separate but related discourse of race which, because "[a]ll capitals are context specific" has the potential in this situation for conversion into symbolic capital.

6.6 Representations which combine race and class

Peter Linebaugh has suggested that given the pivotal role of figures such as Olaudah Equiano at the time when the 'English working class' was, according to E.P. Thompson, emerging, it would be more accurate to speak of "the working class *in* England" (p.416, cited Robson, 1998, p.99). Benedict Anderson remarks:

The dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of *class*, rather than in those of nation: above all in claims to divinity among rulers and to 'blue' or 'white' blood and 'breeding' among aristocracies.

Anderson, 1991, p.149.

The representation of race and class in British culture has a complicated history going back at least as far as Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko or,*

The Royal Slave. A True History, first published in 1688¹¹. In this story, an African prince is sold into slavery through treachery¹². He leads an uprising, making a speech in which he condemns the conditions of slavery, not so much on the grounds that it is morally reprehensible in itself but rather because those who have enslaved himself and his followers are not worthy:

shall we render obedience to such a degenerate race, who have no one humane virtue left to distinguish 'em from the vilest creatures.

Behn, 1688, p.58.

A literary tradition of African nobility in tragic circumstances persists in white English culture and is pressed into colonial service in John Buchan's *Prester John* and Rider Haggard's novels. In *Prester John*, the tragedy of the central black character's situation is in the conflict between his personally noble nature which cannot overcome the inevitable inferiority of his race destiny, an example of what Back calls the racist logic of the assumption that Englishness (=civilisation) and blackness are mutually exclusive categories.

This literary tradition, what we might call (appropriating Butler's idea) forms of upper class blackness which white culture produces for itself, can still be seen at work today, for example in representations of the boxer Chris Eubanks¹³. In recent advertisements for Nescafé¹⁴, Eubanks is represented with (some his own) props symbolising upper class status: a tweedy waistcoat, a monocle, a white bone china cup and saucer¹⁵. However, a comparison with the upper class twit of a contemporary advert: the Bertie Wooster¹⁶ type in the Lambert and Butler cigarette advertisements, is illuminating. Lambert gazes appealingly full face out at us; he looks into our eyes, on the verge of making a silly ass remark backgrounded by the more intelligent pomposity of his man-servant Butler. Eubanks, although his words

¹¹ *Othello*, generally agreed to have been first performed in 1611, deals with questions of race but I think Othello himself is classless, whereas Oroonoko is defined as aristocratic.

¹² Followed by his loyal beloved – a princess. N.B. he doesn't have to marry out of his class.

¹³ I include Eubanks's own representations of himself.

¹⁴ I thought these adverts were for tea at first, they reference Englishness so strongly.

¹⁵ I think it is significant that the cup and saucer are plain white rather than patterned in one of the classic Wedgwood or Royal Doulton designs, i.e. they are the hegemonic white space in which we can stand looking out at Eubanks.

¹⁶ Bertie Wooster is the anti-hero of a collection of books by P.G. Wodehouse. The comedy of the books is often derived from his being the intellectual inferior of his man-servant Jeeves, who reads Spinoza and quotes Keats. P.G. Wodehouse was obliged to leave England during the Second World War as he was a public sympathiser of National Socialism.

have a silly ass lisp (the lisp is Eubanks's own, whether it is silly ass/upper class or ethnic black is up for question): "Thimply the betht", directs a serious and pensive gaze away out of the poster into the far distance, a look as of the noble exile on his face. Not only is his mouth shut, his eye-contact not engaged with ours, he is even looking away from his words; so that although intellectually we know he has said them, the pictorial representation and layout of the poster force us to detach him from silly ass British upper class status and place him instead in the tradition of tragically enslaved/exiled African royalty.

Performances discoursing on race and class from what we might call black standpoint epistemology work differently. Les Back has remarked:

Symbols of England, such as the "Royal Family", are used in [black urban] expressive cultures to poke fun at definitions of Englishness that are racially exclusive.

Back, 1996, p.209.

He describes a black female rap duo performing a piece called "What would happen if the King was Black!" in which Princess Diana, having got rid of Prince Charles, marries black British heavy-weight boxer Frank Bruno.

He also describes how one of his basketball team (Winston), on a bus-ride to a match, performed a monologue playing with race ideologies. The principal in a range of characters in the monologue was the "Upper Class Twit", in whose voice Winston parodied the perceived naturalness of the relationship between class, race, education, nationality and employment opportunities (Back, 1996, pp. 173-6). These two examples show how humour and performance are used in the public sphere to describe a complex oppression combining race and class. As Back remarks, the very existence of this culture defies the logic of "British racial discourse where blackness and Englishness were being reproduced as mutually exclusive categories" (Back, 1996, p.209). Working like the African-American street art signifyin through double-voiced discourse, the pieces also question – although they may in some ways reproduce – the assumption that black communities are always already working class.

Matters of race and class are not only managed in black British culture through humour. Diran Adebayo's novel *some kind of black* explores tensions between a black London culture and white upper class Oxford University culture in social realism. However, humour is ubiquitous in the management of these issues in performance.

Such is the mixing and borrowing between discursive formations generating categories of class, race, gender, sexuality that it will always be imperative to find a mode of analysis which doesn't exclude some of these processes in the attempt to pin down any one of them. I think Bourdieu's *habitus* and four forms of capital can offer one such mode. This doesn't mean I think race and gender can be understood through *habitus* as kinds of capital. The particularities of each formation of identity demand a mode of analysis sensitive to their own specifics. I mean that *habitus* is a mode of analysis which provides the "more accurate diagnosis" of class which Gilroy was waiting for, and can be joined with other concepts and modes of analysis which uncover other forms of identification. Skeggs successfully uses Butler's thinking with Bourdieu's to produce her understanding of class and gender. Here, I will draw on Bourdieu in the work of Skeggs and Back to produce my understanding of race and class in *Brown Girl in the Ring*.

6.7 *Brown Girl in the Ring.*

Sweep it under the carpet appeared again in October 1998 as part of Talawa Theatre Company's "Zebra Crossing 2" series. By then it had changed its title to *Brown Girl in the Ring* and was considerably expanded into:

the story of HRH Regina descending from a Royal lineage of Moët Chandon, and a Royal sewerage of Gorgonzolas. Her Great Grand PaPaPa from Africa brought a curse upon the family by impregnating – a Lilywhite – and that was the last we heard of the natives: *Sweep it under the carpet*.

Zebra Crossing 2 programme notes, Talawa Theatre Group, 1998.

In January 1999, the show was presented at Oval House Theatre:

[A] tragi-comic monologue, a regal meditation on racism from a Royal Highness with a Difference. So: we all know that those colonising white aristocrats weren't averse to a 'bit of the other'. But the possibility that black people should be biologically

connected to the European royal families has never been quite so outrageously explored and exploded as in the persona of Queenie herself – a genetic throwback who pops up five hundred years down the line to turn a few white faces very red indeed. This marauding monarch likes a bit of caviare with her rice ‘n’ peas – and there’s no way she’s going to be swept under the carpet...

Oval House press release, 1999.

Brown Girl in the Ring moved on to the Drill Hall, and is published as a play-script in Mason-John’s book of the same name.

I have seen *Brown Girl in the Ring* firstly in its earliest form as part of the Lois Weaver 1996 “O Solo Mio” workshops when it was called *sweep it under the carpet*, then when it was presented as part of the Talawa Theatre Group series “Zebra Crossing 2” at the Lyric, Hammersmith in 1998, and thirdly at Oval House in January 1999. I am also working with the text of the show in the book of the same name, which is the (shorter) text as it was performed at the Lyric.

Describing *Brown Girl in the Ring* as a “tragi-comic monologue”, the Oval House press release suggests it draws on both the traditions of race and upper class status which I have described. The central character Regina is on the one hand a comic contradiction of our understanding that black means working-class, in the tradition of humourous performance. There are also elements of tragedy, of the tradition of exiled royalty in her character. Regina is the victim of a false consciousness. She describes events in such a way that although the audience sees them as racist abuse, she merely finds them puzzling. This is part of her upper class character. “Oh how odd,” she seems to say. It isn’t appropriate to her class identity for her to experience the intense emotion of anger at racism which is a coerced part of black identification.

In the book *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Mason-John describes how Lois Weaver had instructed workshop members to bring in a picture of their family. We come to this bare statement towards the end of the book, after reading about Mason-John’s upbringing in foster homes, as a Barnardo child and for a disastrous period with her biological mother. Mason-John does not talk about the feelings she may have had in response to this instruction, but remarks:

I looked at a picture of a jigsaw puzzle showing a group of white French aristocrats at a ball and decided that this was my family. After all, as a Barnardo child I socialised regularly with the royal, the rich, the famous, at parties and events thrown annually.

Mason-John, 1999, p.99.

She has described to me in interviews the experience of being a Barnardo child taken to shows and parties such as an annual event at the Royal Mint, at which the children were treated like royalty.

As well as drawing on the black cultural world parodying an association between whiteness and royalty, Mason-John is drawing on private experience of being treated like royalty. I have discussed above how I think Mason-John drew on formative childhood discourse in her political work. Savitri Hensman's account of Mason-John's performance persona notes:

Valerie Mason-John traced the beginnings of her development as a performer to early childhood.

I've always performed, really. I think, when you're the only black person in a white environment, you're always on show. I grew up in an orphanage, and every year we would go away on holiday ... Every Sunday we had to go to church, and it was mentioned, "Here we have the Barnardo kids to sing a song for you."

Hensman, in Rapi and Chowdhry (eds.), 1998, p.211.

Performance for Mason-John derives in part from a childhood experience of being continually on show as a black person in a white environment, also from having to, as it were, 'sing for her supper'. In the same account, however, Mason-John describes her childhood as "very lucky ... there was a lot of input into performing" (*ibid.*). She also describes as formative her experience as an adolescent going clubbing, when it is clear she was heavily visibilised as a black person and as a woman who moved on and used the dance floor rather than standing submissively to be looked at. Being stared at as the only black person, or expected to engage in certain embodied practices as a woman are situations of oppression. In the introduction to the play *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Mason-John describes how when she entered clubs DJs would play the song of that name to signal to white girls to watch their handbags. Engaging actively through performance with this painful experience allows Mason-John not only to transcend her own suffering but to develop a public piece of creative art.

Most small girls dream of being a princess in disguise instead of the child of our ordinary parents. We all have moments when we long for a sudden accession to power and popularity, perhaps just for the glamour, perhaps also for the chance to bestow favours instead of being denied them and excluded from the in-group. Perhaps the dream is all the more compelling for a black child trans-racially fostered, educated in racist schools, briefly and disastrously placed with one whom the authorities saw as her 'real' mother. Mason-John also had the experience of being sometimes treated like royalty, precisely because she was in a situation of deprivation as a Barnardo child. She draws on the powerful emotional sources of creativity located in her particular personal experience of a common childhood dream. (This making the particular and personal an experience with common resonances can be one of the defining moments of art, as I argued in an analysis of Toichi Nakata's *Osaka Story*¹⁷.)

In the Talawa Theatre Group programme description of *Brown Girl in the Ring* that part of the piece which inverts the racism of upper class genealogy and marriage practices is selected out. This small section of the monologue draws on the literary tradition of enslaved African royalty, inverts racist marriage practices by suggesting the proud black family couldn't comprehend love for a white woman, but switches very rapidly back to the white on black racism of white upper classes:

Now you see I descend from a royal lineage of Africans who were captured and brought to France in the 16th century. Indeed they remained very proud. So much so that they couldn't quite understand why my Great Great Grand Dadada was affected by the paler complexion, Lily Whites so to speak. The poor man brought a curse upon the family by impregnating a Persil White, a, a, a Daz White a, a, a, Tampax White a, a, a, Lily white. And that was the last we heard of the natives.

Sweep it under the carpet.

My Great Great Grand Mamama from the Dom Perignon family was married off to the family queer, and packed off to England to raise her predicament in secret. When my Great Grand

¹⁷ "Self and Other in Performed Narrative in the British Gay and Diaspora Communities." Pacific-Asia Cultural Studies Forum seminar, Goldsmiths College, University of London, November 1997.

Mamama was 18 she was also betrothed to the next family queer in line, in the hope of erasing the primitive strain.

Mason-John, 1999, p.104.

Talawa Theatre Group are concerned with the positive and strong representation of black people and culture, so it's not surprising that it's this small section which catches their eye. However, it should be borne in mind that the character Regina continues from here on to recount a story of white racist reaction to the black 'throwback' family member. As I discussed above, Mason-John describes in the book *Brown Girl in the Ring* her experience of being censured for her relationships with white women. Her account of the foolishly proud royal African lineage, who look down on the white people who actually dominate them, works this personal experience into an exposé of this form of separatist politics as the mirroring of white on black racism.

The performance piece was inspired by Mason-John's having to fill in an ambiguous area of her life. As Mary Douglas argues, ambiguity is an area with the potential to be either polluting or sacred. Mason-John chose to celebrate this ambiguity in her life, to sacralise it. However, she didn't do so in the reiterative/generative manner of ritual but in the deconstructive manner of performance. When instructed to provide a coherent photographic picture of her family she chose a jigsaw puzzle of a group of French aristocrats: a collection of pieces which could be put together to make a coherent picture but could also have bits taken out of it. We are meant to construct a jigsaw puzzle. In the construction, we often have trouble finding the right pieces to fit the gaps. If the puzzle is an old one, some pieces may indeed be missing. We struggle sometimes with pieces which we think ought to fit and long to hammer them into place with brute force even though intellectually we know they are wrong and won't satisfy us by making a complete and proper picture. Occasionally we may even get a piece cut so that although its shape fits into the gap, the colour doesn't seem to match.

Large-sized bits of the jig-saw puzzle, especially pieces showing bodies without heads, formed the main part of the set for *Brown Girl in the Ring*. During the piece, Regina says this line:

that night I tore out a page from the Bollys' album, and where there were heads cut out, I pasted in pictures like me from a native book I acquired as a child.

Mason-John, 1999, p.107.

This figure translates Mason-John's more private desire, that of a Barnardo's child for a family, into a more widely shared desire, that of a black person trying to fit into a world dominated by white upper-class values.

Alongside the jigsaw puzzle metaphor, another powerful trope in Mason-John's piece is the use of brand-names associated with the upper classes. Regina's social world is peopled by families with the names of champagnes¹⁸ and speciality cheeses. She describes a genealogy of Dom Perignons, Lansons and Moët et Chandon's and on her scandalous birth is "packed off to family friends in England, the Bollys of Ascot" (Mason-John, 1999, p.106). Later, the use of upper class brand-names collapses into references to groceries associated in Britain with black culture:

Now you see I am the Queen, descending from a royal lineage of Africans, a, a, a, Palm Oils, a, a, a, Moët et Chandon's, a, a, a, Cassava Leaves, a, a, a, Gorgonzolas, a, a, a Maggi Sauces, a, a, a, Special Brews, and that was the very, very, very last we heard of the natives.

Sweep it under the carpet.

Mason-John, 1999, p.110.

One of the finest twists of this symbolic appropriation of signifiers occurs just after Regina's putting heads on in the picture torn from the Bolly family album. Throughout the performance piece, the phrase "Sweep it under the carpet" crops up: first in reference to a dropped (champagne) glass, then in reference to black politics, then to genealogical scandal:

I woke up to Mrs Bolly passed out on my bed and Mr Bolly screaming 'Sweep it under the carpet, sweep it under the carpet.' (*Drops jigsaw piece.*) 'Sweep it under the carpet.' Baffled by the whole affair, I pulled the covers over my head and woke up the next morning under an Axminster.

Mason-John, 1999, p.107.

This is one of the painfully funny, poignant moments of Regina's false consciousness. She doesn't stop to pursue the obvious conclusion that Mr Bolly has just tried to sweep her (for being black? or for being in bed with Mrs

¹⁸ Mason-John is known for a love of champagne (and belgian chocolates), e.g. one of her birthday parties was held in the champagne bar at Kettner's.

Bolly?) under the carpet, but instead makes us laugh because at least it was an Axminster.

These brand-names are markers of upper class status, but others are used as markers of blackness:

I look like the golly
 On the jam jar jar jar
 ...
 But I'm not black, Lizard, I'm not, I'm not
 My mummy says I'm coloured, so there
 She says I'm coffee coloured
 Just like Nescafé

Mason-John, 1999, p.108.

There is a tradition of the useage of foods to describe black peoples and particularly black women, which can't be treated as simply negative. It is used as positive affirmation by black women ourselves, and especially in black lesbian love poetry¹⁹. In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, the character Regina doesn't use these references to describe herself, but Mason-John shows how they are used by others to refer to black children.

The jigsaw puzzle which ought to be put together in one way only, but which can easily have pieces lost from it, and the use of brand-names associated with the upper classes or foods associated with black cultures, mingle references to class and race. Class genealogies and race purity campaigns also both rely on the same raw material. As Anderson (1991) shows, the prohibition of inter-marriage between classes and concepts such as the blue blood of aristocrats form parts of a discourse markedly similar to the discourse of race purity in both white and black communities. *Brown Girl in the Ring* shows how the discursive formations of race and class copy, replicate and reinforce each other.

At the beginning of the piece, the incident which formed the whole of *sweep it under the carpet* shows how discursive formations of class and race may clash, and still reinforce each other. Regina appears on stage to classical music, performing classical ballet and holding a champagne glass.

¹⁹ I want to lick that grin off your face
 sweet woman
 and taste your moist tangerine tongue
 in my mouth

From "For Sandra", by Shabnam, in Choong et al, 1987.

Her upper class status is signified by these accessories – this display of economic capital, whatever we might assume in relation to her skin colour. Unlike the participants in Robson's study, we have here someone whose material wealth, whose economic capital, matches her embodied practices but these are undercut by some other discourse. I will give the whole of this first section:

Waiter, Waiter, Wait ... Wait ...

On the abrupt impulse of 'Wait ...' she sits back into her throne. She speaks as if she is in conversation with the waiter.

Wait!

Champagne glass goes flying.

Oh how stupid of me. Sweep it under the carpet.

She looks up.

At long last.

Yes, most perfunctory

I'll have caviar ... and rice and peas

I said, Caviar ... and rice and peas

How dare you question me?

No I'm not mistaken

Caviar ... and rice and peas

I had hashish for starters

Exotic, um lychees will be absolutely marvellous for dessert

Oh waiter would you be so kind as to switch the air conditioning
on when you return to your menial tasks.

I beg your pardon

Oh used to the heat, yes, yes of course Australia was absolutely
divine last month.

Aborigine?

No no, you don't quite understand. I am as English as Her
Majesty.

My title is Regina

Not vagina, Regina

W!O!G! My poor poppet you do seem to be losing it.

I am most definitely not a Western Oriental Gentlemen.

Chip, chip, chip. On my shoulder? Which chip/ On my
shoulder,

chip, raining chips.

But it only rains cats and dogs in England.

Now scarper, enough of your verbal bowel syndrome

I have friends to attend to.

Mason-John, 1999, pp.101-2.

Regina's first line calls on someone in service: the waiter, further asserting her class status. She can command his presence. When she sends her champagne glass flying, she remarks "Oh how stupid of me" in the sort of upper class tones which mean nothing of the sort, i.e. I'm just condescending to pretend I might be at fault. In the exchange between Regina and the waiter, we can see upper class arrogance and racism battling as to who can get away with most rudeness and thereby assert most power.

The only other personae in the piece who make a (non-)appearance on stage apart from Regina, are the waiter, an imaginary childhood friend Lizard and – in the Oval House production, but not the Lyric Theatre production – a non-defined off-stage person on the other end of a telephone call. The waiter, who we assume to be white and male, is the most clearly delineated of these personae. Because he is not physically represented on the stage, we are forced to think of the dynamics of race and class which bring him into being. Regina echoes many of his remarks, which usually represent an even more blatant racism than his incredulity at her cultural mixture of caviar, rice and peas:

No, I don't want reggae music I was quite happy listening to Handel's 'Messiah', you toe rag.
Mason-John, 1999, p.106.

Her only weapon against his prejudice is her own.

I noted above Mason-John's use of signifiers such as classical music, ballet and champagne to assert upper-class status against the racist logic following her blackness. I also briefly noted the upper class tones in which Regina condescends to the waiter, when she remarks: "Oh how stupid of me. Sweep it under the carpet" about the champagne glass she drops. The superficial courtesy of her taking blame is immediately undercut by her peremptory order, and doesn't serve to apologise but rather to assert her status by condescension. This performance of class status is supported by the use of 'gaze'. In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Mason-John can be seen to refuse eye-contact with the waiter, turning her face partly towards the audience. Her voice rises from a bored monotone, her face loses 'well-bred' blankness only in anger at the most outrageous of the waiter's remarks.

Treating the waiter as of no consequence and unworthy of attention puts him 'in his place'; and places Regina above him.

Both Les Back and Beverley Skeggs have noted the use of the upper class 'gaze'. In strikingly similar accounts, Back's and Skeggs's participants describe their experiences in upper class areas:

Derek: ... Down Kensington I went into this shop, right, and this is them [mimics people turning their heads], "*Ras clah*t [an expletive], what is he doing in here?"

...

Derek: Lunch time now I went down one road and there were all these mall cafés

...

and you wanna see the people a look when I pass the door. Like [posh voice] "I hope he doesn't come in here" – that type of look [looks down his nose]. You watch tomorrow now [group laughs] there is going to be some rough business, rough business. The people them a look at me and I give them some strong, strong look.

Back, 1996, pp.163-4 (Back's italics).

We'd all gone up to Manchester the other Saturday, you know for a day out, the three of us. It was alright, in fact we had a right laugh ... but we were in Kendal's during the day, you know where the really posh food is, and we were laughing about all the chocolates and how many we could eat – if we could afford them – and this woman she just looked at us. If looks could kill. Like we were only standing there. We weren't doing anything wrong. We weren't scruffy or anything. She just looked. It was like it was her place and we didn't belong there. And you know what we just all walked away. We should have punched her in the face. We didn't say anything until about half an hour later. Can you imagine? Well and truly put in our place ... It's things like that put you off going. You feel better staying around here. [Wendy, 1986].

Skeggs, 1997, p.92.

As Back and Skeggs point out, these accounts identify particular areas as 'classified'. Cafés in Kensington, the posh chocolate shop in Manchester, these are upper class areas. Those who feel they rightfully inhabit these spaces attempt to keep others out with a 'look', a look which would kill if it could. Working class black men and white women are 'put in their *place*' by such a look. They decide to stick to areas they are allowed to occupy: "You feel better staying around here", however poor the resources are in those areas in comparison with upper class areas.

Derek and Wendy both respond to being put in their places with feelings of violence. Derek threatens that the following day there will be “rough business”. Wendy says “We should have punched her in the face”. In reality, both are forced to retreat back into their own localities. The judicial system would only recognise the force of the violent attack they wanted to make. It doesn't recognise the force with which Derek and Wendy are kept out of certain areas, areas of better paid and more readily available employment and better leisure facilities²⁰.

In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, a black upper class woman goes into a posh restaurant and orders caviar with the eccentric addition of rice and peas. Although she occupies a class-appropriate space, attempts are made to dislocate her because her class status is undermined by her race and ethnic status. She invests economic and cultural capital, but because cultural capital only exists in relation to networks of other forms of capital and furthermore all forms of capital are context specific, her investment can be annulled. Discourse of race can cut across that of class, refusing to recognise Regina's cultural capital as legitimate and therefore barring it from transformation into symbolic capital and power.

Regina doesn't take this blocking of her capital investment quietly. She uses the gaze to put the waiter in his place so that she can occupy hers: her seat at a table in a posh restaurant. In addition she uses another tool, which Back's material refers to although Back himself does not discuss it fully: a particular 'voice'. This is the voice Derek imitates when he says: “I hope he doesn't come in here”, the one Michael countered with “the Jamaican bit” (quoted in Back, 1996, p.154). “Now scarper,” Regina tells the waiter, i.e. this space belongs to me, I can assert who should work/play in it; I can command when you should and should not occupy this space. Having called the waiter

²⁰ It is significant that in addition to being working class, Derek is black and Wendy a woman. Derek had been working in Kensington. I suggest that had he been white, he might have been subject to upper class gaze in a different way. Some working class people must be tolerated even in Kensington if the cafés are to continue to function, although if possible they will be invisibilised. If they are white and male, they can be normalised, subjected only to invisibilising tactics rather than outright repulsion. As Back points out, Derek was subject to stereo-typing as a mugger. In the same account, Derek's friend Cookie - a bar clerk in a large court, says of the people he works with: “They think we are all muggers and tiefs [thieves].” (cited Back, 1996, p.163).

into the space in her first lines (“Waiter, waiter, wait ... wait”), she now tells him to leave. She does so not only in upper class accents but with the slightly affected vocabulary of the upper classes. “Scarper” is different to ‘Please leave’, ‘Get lost’ or ‘Fuck off’. It is an old fashioned word, associated more with children, which combines a condescending tone - *de haut en bas*, with casual rudeness. The concentrated rudeness of an expletive such as ‘Fuck off’, would suggest the waiter mattered enough to get angry about. “Now scarper” dismisses him as much from Regina’s mind as from the scene.

Like the upper class gaze, the upper class voice is an adaptable tool which can serve purposes of classism or racism. This is exemplified in the dance piece by Jiva *Paki Boy*, first performed in the South Asian Queer Arts Festival *Sweet Like Burfi* (February 2000). In one of the sections of this piece, Jiva enacts his distress and sense of oppression while a voice makes remarks such as: ‘What’s a nice Indian boy like you doing in a place like this?’, ‘Drink? Do you drink? Oh no, of course not.’ It is partly what is said that operates to put the Paki Boy in a place lower than the upper class voice, but more than that it is a combination of a nasal upper class accent, a bored flat tone and the emphasis on particular words which convey despising, that operate to dislocate the ‘boy’ and place him elsewhere. A combination of colonialism, racism and classism is operated in the Paki Boy’s interlocutor’s voice.

In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Regina operates the voice to *combat* racism. She is not so successful as the white upper class male of *Paki Boy*. He utilises tone and accent alone. She is often thrown back onto explicit statement:

How dare you question me?
Mason-John, 1999, pp.102.

Having to explicitly assert power instead of tacitly rely on a ‘natural’ conversion of capital to power means already acknowledging her grip on the situation is loosening. (Phelan might say having to make herself visible instead of relying on the invisibility of power.)

Regina is situated in “the schemes of perception, thought and action” (Bourdieu, cited Robson, 1998, p. 121) which guarantee the ‘correctness’ of upper-class practices: arrogance, condescension and material carelessness

are implicit in her speech and movement, her embodied practices. However, her situation reveals that this upper-class *habitus* is also always already white. Regina's investment of cultural capital is not recognised as legitimate. To force legitimation of her investment: her order – for a culturally mixed dinner of caviar and rice and peas, she has to give up some of her social capital. When roused by the waiter's refusal to legitimate her order, she is forced to behave like no lady and lose her temper. She knows that she should not fall into the trap of being “happy to feel rather than think” (Gilroy, 1988, in Gilroy, 1993b, p.102) but the alternative here to feeling angry about racism is false consciousness – not thought – and collusion with her oppression. She let herself be swept under the Axminster by Mr Bolly but she isn't going to suffer quietly when an upstart waiter comes between her and her caviar, rice and peas.

6.8 Conclusion

In this analysis, we can see that class, race and gender can't be separated. The upper class gaze and voice are supposedly about asserting class status. Back and Skeggs show how they are modulated by considerations of the race and gender of the working class people being classified, dislocated, relocated. Mason-John shows how they will only work seamlessly and with the real effectiveness of invisibility (Phelan) if they are supported by what are understood to be the appropriate race and probably also gender status: whiteness and masculinity. Without these, assertion of class privilege is obliged to explicate itself rather than remain powerfully implicit. Making an explicit (visible) assertion will never work as well as referencing an implicit (invisible) assumption. As the play progresses, Regina doesn't get served the order she has made. The waiter re-appears briefly to undermine her again: changing Handel's *Messiah* for reggae music and needing to be told to make Regina's guests stand up when she enacts herself as a (black) Queen.

A dissatisfaction with Marxist analysis of class – which subsumes, instead of articulating with, the politics of race – has been met in some academic studies by use of Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and four kinds of

capital. These prove to be helpful in bringing out the dynamics at play in a performance which shows how discursive formations of race, class and gender can cross-cut to support the upper-class, white, male subject position.

Chapter Seven

Ajamu. Thinking of Bodies.

It's almost as if identity is a performance; as if he's performing himself in a number of different roles.

Stuart Hall, speaking about Ajamu's work, in Campbell, 1995.

Portraiture is performance, and like any performance, in the balance of its effects it is good or bad, not natural or unnatural. I can understand being troubled by this idea – that all portraits are performances – because it seems to imply some kind of artifice that conceals the truth about the sitter. But that's not it at all.

The point is that you can't get at the thing itself, the real nature of the sitter, by stripping away the surface. The surface is all you've got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface. All that you can do is to manipulate that surface – gesture, costume, expression – radically and correctly.

Richard Avedon, cited Phelan, 1994, p. 37.

This thesis has been moving towards a theoretical framework which can manage a complex of identification. Academic studies and performance material have contributed to building an understanding of the politics and processes involved in the formation of identities. In this final chapter I will draw on the work of photographer Ajamu to explore the following topics. The study of the processes of identification is one half of the field called performativity. Ajamu's work is, like my other participants', concerned because of personal experience from what Hegel called the Slave's position, with uncovering those processes in politics. In addition, Ajamu works with portraits, and his experience offers further opportunity to think about how the body figures in black and gay work. I will here develop the distinction I draw between ritual and performance: the second half of the field of performativity. I will also show how queer is developing in Ajamu's most recent work, which goes beyond personal standpoint to tackle the politically delicate subject of (dis)ability.

I first met Ajamu in 1997, in relation to a film I was thinking of making about black gay male artists and what I thought might be a special relationship in their work to the body. I was thinking through reactions to the Cartesian mind/body split and the ways in which those defined as 'Other': female and (as

in this case) black and gay, are associated in that binary split with the body. It interested me that so many black gay male artists were doing work in which the human body – often represented by their own bodies, was central.

In the end the woman with whom I wanted to make the film and I quarrelled and the project came to nothing but I remained interested in Ajamu's work and he remained interested in continuing to work with me. In July 1997 I travelled with him to Huddersfield (his home town) to see his photographs in an exhibition called *Kissing the Dust*. (I persuaded *Gay Times* to give me my coach fare in return for a review of Ajamu's work in the exhibition, and they generously paid me an unexpected fee too!) On the coach journey up to Huddersfield, Ajamu talked to me for several hours about his life and work and this unpublished interview forms the main basis of my account of his life here.

I have collected catalogues and CVs from previous and subsequent exhibitions, including the catalogue for his 1994 solo exhibition *Black Bodyscapes*, in which both David A. Bailey and Kobena Mercer wrote about his work. I have seen the film made about him by Topher Campbell and gone to see his work whenever it was exhibited.

The body is and always has been central to Ajamu's work. He shows us an unequivocal corporeal presence thrusting aside both wispy notions of essentialism and those strands of postmodern thinking which fail to incorporate the body. Ajamu's work does not deal with a concrete body but with a corpo-reality which only 'really' exists in the discourse of political meaning:

[The body's] only a shell, it's only flesh and bone basically, but there's so much invested in it that affects how I walk on the street, for instance.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

This idea is reminiscent of Althusser; matter "exists in different modalities; all rooted in the last instance in 'physical' matter" (cited Butler, 1993, endnote 13, p.252). Here I will look at why a body which has investments made in it is so crucial for an artist like Ajamu, and at aspects of his life which force the body into his work as a locus of meaning. I will think about whether his work is based on a psychically damaging detachment from a subjective experience of self – as

Gilroy might argue. In “Black Bodies in the Black Public Sphere” (in Thomas (ed.), 1997) he talks about a shift from engagement in a black music and dance culture in which we experience ourselves subjectively (as raced), to a video culture which detaches us from subjective experience. We might think of this as a postmodern turn – we all attempt to move to the panopticon (the tower in which you could keep up a surveillance on all sides, a concept which Foucault found in the work of eighteenth century philosopher Joseph Bentham) only to find we are viewing our detached selves rather than some other Other. Gilroy expresses his unhappiness with this turn through Fanon’s thoughts, which are also figured through the body:

Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema ... it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person ... I was given not one but two, three places ... It was not that I was finding febrile co-ordinates in the world. I existed triply; I occupied space. I moved toward the other ... and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea

Fanon, cited in Gilroy, in Thomas (ed.) 1997, p.26.

Perhaps the word which best describes Ajamu is mischievous. His work is usually provocative, may be wicked and is often funny. On the coach journey North, he described himself as having British irony, Jamaican brashness and Northern bluntness – a rich mix from which to get a queer art and politics.

7.1 Early Life

Ajamu was born in Huddersfield in 1963, into a supportive family. He remains close to his mother – who is shown in the Campbell film, and to an ‘aunt’ – an older friend of his mother’s to whom he is like a son. Although he has two older sisters, they didn’t come over from Jamaica to join Ajamu and his younger siblings until he was eleven or twelve, so his situation in the family is anomalous: not the first child but the oldest child in the home for the early years of his life, and the first boy. Family support was important to someone who was different in an environment where conformity was strongly encouraged for particular reasons.

Huddersfield has a high black population. Ajamu described it as:
 a big town but it might as well be a village. If you do something out
 of the ordinary, everyone will know about it.
 Unpublished interview, July 1997.

Macho is at a high premium here for a number of reasons:

Historically it's always been defined for black men how men
 should behave – that's why a lot of black men walk about like John
 Wayne – with two guns strapped to your hips.
 Unpublished interview, July 1997.

Here Ajamu is contextualising the difference of being gay in a historical tradition
 of black masculine embodied practices which draw on aggressive iconic figures
 common to white and black communities such as the archetypal cowboy.
 Instead of walking like John Wayne, Ajamu dressed like a skinhead. He was told
 that was white behaviour. He was listening to punk and rock music in a town
 where black men were into reggae¹ and soul². In 1982 he set up a punk band
 called Negro Twins.

Ajama's situation problematises a celebration of the ritual enactment of
 subjective (raced) experience through dance and music culture which Gilroy
 wishes to celebrate (Gilroy, in Thomas (ed.) 1997). The realm of reggae and
 soul which was enacting a subjective experience of black masculinity in
 Huddersfield was also enacting that experience as hetero-normative. He couldn't
 fit in that culture. Perhaps this was because he is gay, and so 'queer', but maybe
 it was also because he liked punk, rock and thinking about who he is. Being gay
 was profoundly significant:

If you're a gay guy within a small town, sometimes the price you
 can pay is death, if people perceive you are. Sometimes the
 problem isn't that you're gay but that you're different.
 Unpublished interview, July 1997.

For a while, he had a job collecting glasses in the (white) gay club The Gemini
 (since closed down) in Huddersfield.

The black club was just around the corner. I used to stand across
 the road, wait for the road to be clear of black people, run across

¹ Fusion of jazz, jump blues and traditional Jamaican musics (Gilroy, 1987).

² African-American gospel music socialised in the struggle for racial justice.

the road. When I was leaving I would ask someone to look [out for me]. This was like 1983.

I thought then that being gay was about wearing leathers. Walking around the town as a black person dressed like that, it's freaky. But for me ... in terms of my family that was O.K..

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

Here we get an idea of the narrow provincial attitudes to the difference of gay identity in Britain: attitudes which may be dangerous to the point of life-threatening. The black community in Huddersfield was too small for Ajamu to escape recognition if he met someone-else who was black as he left the gay club, and recognition as gay might even lead to death. This community exercised pressure to conform rather than fragment into the multiple identities which Julien and Mercer describe as rising in the 1980s. In a beleaguered provincial black community, stress on conformity is not necessarily more urgent than it is in the mainstream white community, but it is more explicit and so more obvious. Being different from those who are already struggling with a designated label of difference means that identity is modulated in some complex ways. To wear leathers is to make a statement in a provincial black community which is read differently in the provincial white mainstream.

On leaving school, Ajamu went on a catering course – and joined the territorials. He says that apart from the racism, he enjoyed the territorials because of the uniform. He had left school with 5 CSEs, going on to university to study the arts “wasn't an option, it wasn't even on the agenda” (unpublished interview, July 1997). He left Huddersfield for Leeds in around 1984. “You either left town or you just conformed.” (Unpublished interview, July 1997.) He changed his name.

The difference of being a gay man certainly reinforced Ajamu's detachment from enactment of black masculinity in those forms of ritual like music or clothes which are also part of hetero-normativity, but black politics remained vitally important to him. In 1986 he set up a magazine called BLAC with a group of friends and began exploring Islam. The Muslim faith remains a political and historical resource that he dips in and out of.

In 1987, he did a diploma in photography³. He was already taking photographs.

I was always having these arguments with the tutor; they were into technique, technique, technique. [Ajamu was into ideas.] He gave me Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* and Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* and told me to leave college and move to London.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

Black gay contacts in the North were closeted, the only way to meet people was through coded adverts in the *Caribbean Times*: 'black male, 34, seeks friends'. In October 1987, Ajamu saw an advert in *The Caribbean Times* for the first national black gay men's conference.

I wrote a letter to the BLGC [Black Lesbian and Gay Centre] and to Dirgaab Richards, saying I'm an isolated black gay man in Leeds, can you tell me more about the conference.

Unpublished interview, August 1999.

It was amazing. Up until that point I probably knew about four black gay men and coming to the conference.... There was like about sixty black gay men. It was mind-blowing for me to know there is a black gay scene.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

I went back up to Leeds but moved down [to London] in January '88 – because I thought 'I have *arrived!*'

Unpublished interview, August 1999.

This conference did offer a space in which Ajamu could experience belonging. However, it is a kind of space which in the terms of Gilroy's 1997 chapter we would have to think of as detached and objective: a conference at which the nature of black gay masculinity was thought through as well as a collective (ritual) event at which black gay masculinity could be experienced. (Gilroy is of course well aware that it is a racist trap for black people to validate feeling over thought.) It may be helpful here to return to Skeggs's understanding of experience as not necessarily excluding theoretical analysis. If theoretical analysis can be experience, can there also be a kind of thinking about the self

³ « Un art moyen » as Bourdieu calls it. Bourdieu describes photography as different from painting or music because it doesn't require an upper class education. It is « accessible à tous, tant au point de vue technique qu'au point de vue économique, », "accessible to all, as much from the point of view of technique as from that of economics." (Bourdieu, 1965, p.25).

which is not detached but which reconnects us with ourselves as subjects? This idea supposes that we have been detached, that we are in the panopticon nauseous with the spectacle of our free-floating selves; but that it is not us who are responsible for detaching ourselves from our subjective sense of self-hood. Ajamu is not responsible for detaching himself from his sense of himself as a subject, rather he emerged as a human being to find himself called against social regulation and with a “muted voice” with which to try to speak up against social regulation/hegemonic discourse. In this situation, where he can find pockets of ‘community’, he enjoys them but since these are rare and narrowly confined spaces, he had to think about it in order to develop a “voice” in relation to his circumstances. He had to detach himself from a subjective sense of self, in order to think objectively, politically, and create a sense of self, develop a more appropriate “voice” with which to speak with others also in his situation. He could then hope to return as a subject not to the constrictive conformative identity offered by a provincial black community where it is affirmed in the ritual realm of reggae and soul music, but to blackness as a multiplicity of identities.

In London, Ajamu met (and modeled for) Rotimi Fani-Kayode:

It was very important for me at that stage to meet a black gay photographer. Just seeing him work, where his ideas come from.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

He had previously met David A. Bailey (the first black photographer he ever met). At one point in London, he shared a house with Sonya Boyce, Maxine Smith, Kichi Kwok and Ayo White. These people, all photographers, and visitors to the house like Bailey, were very supportive at this early stage of his professional development. Like Patience Agbabi, Ajamu was part of a black British arts community as much as a black gay community.

He first showed his work in 1990 (as part of the *Different Circles* exhibition in Brixton Art Gallery):

The first time I showed work was probably in 1990, when I was 27, and that’s quite late but I think I’ve done quite well in that short period of time. I can’t really complain.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

In 1991 he had his first solo exhibition at Centerprise Community Centre in London. Since then he has shown his work all over Europe and in North and South America. In London he also became involved in movements like the Black Unity and Freedom Party, was a founder member of the black gay magazine *Wickers and Bullers* and set up a Black Perverts' network – a safer sex group for black and Asian men. Ajamu had indeed found somewhere where he could arrive.

7.2 Themes influencing the work

The body is and always has been central to Ajamu's work: from *Bodybuilder in a Bra* (1990) to the 1997 work shown in the *Kissing the Dust* exhibition ("Ajamu's photographs explicate a philosophy of the body as world referent and primary mode." Simon Grennan in *Kissing the Dust* catalogue) to his latest work around the grotesque (some of which was recently presented in *Anti/Bodies: a spectacle of strangeness*, Standpoint Gallery, London, Sept-Oct 1999). Rather than see this as a detachment of the subjective experience of his own black gay body, I see it as a response to the way that, as a black gay man, the body has always been *made* central in Ajamu's life. In his account of his early life in Huddersfield, he described how the black community expected black men to walk and dress in certain ways in a conscriptive and constrictive discourse of black masculinity. As a gay man, the male body was also objectively eroticised for Ajamu from early on:

I think the reason I got into the body was ... being an isolated black gay man in Huddersfield, the only outlet for my desires and fantasies was the porno magazines.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

Ajama cited various photographers as early influences: Robert Mapplethorpe, George Platt-Lynes, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Wilhelm Van Gloden but he added that before he came across this work:

I was consuming a lot of porn – black gay American porn. I wanted to make something different from what I was consuming. I like pornography anyway, but I wanted to make something different – the work I've created, rarely do I use classical figures, in terms of

big dicks, etc. ... in porn the guys didn't look like the guys I was seeing and fancying – I wanted to say what are my experiences as a black gay man born and raised in Huddersfield.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

When Ajamu says he wanted to express his experiences as a black gay man born and raised in Huddersfield, he means his subjective desiring experience of actual black men he could see at home as opposed to the unreal fantasy black man of American pornography. However, the consumption of pornography was also part of his experience and because he was isolated as a young black gay man in the provinces, it was the only place where his desire was legitimated by a sense of social collectivity. Black gay American pornographic magazines were then his only link to a community of black gay men; their distant anonymous sharing of his desire was one of the only realms in which that desire could experience a legitimate being; one of the very few ritual realms in which a black gay masculinity could be generated and iterated. Pornography is therefore a powerful locus in Ajamu's experience. It is one where as well as pleasure and legitimation, he experienced dissatisfaction. However, we can't argue that Ajamu's dissatisfaction enabled him to transcend a pernicious youthful consumption of pornography. His style remains marked by the photographic style of pornography in which bodies are frozen at the centre of the frame for our consumption. I mean that this is the style of pornography, not Ajamu's style. Ajamu's style, while marked by this pornographic style, is different in some fundamental and important ways. His is a double-voiced discourse, an ironic reading of pornography. Part of his experience of pornography is, in Skeggs's sense of experience, his conscious reflection on how he wanted to work that experience. He worked it through irony.

The relationship of Ajamu's work to pornography remains potentially dangerous and this dangerous skirting on the edge of immorality gives the work some of its power. A standard feminist account of this relationship would have to dismiss the vicious influence of a pornographic morality. However, a queer perspective – drawing on the postmodern understanding that none of us are innocent – looks not at the pornography but at the dynamic of how Ajamu

experienced it, not as passive consumption but as an active engagement with it. If Ajamu passively consumes and reproduces pornography – or actively engages with it and chooses to reproduce its morality – we can make a moral judgement (while understanding that that judgement comes only from our own position, which is contingent and partial). We must work through to that moral understanding and not immediately dismiss something because it is reified in our personal taxonomy as an immoral object. Queer is not an a-moral approach; it demands that we always interrogate the basis on which we are making moral judgements.

There are other influences on Ajamu's work which are also troubling. Ajamu acknowledges Mapplethorpe's influence on his early work in his use of cropping and framing. He spoke freely about the ambiguities of this source for inspiration:

I was living up North, I came across Mapplethorpe's work and for me it was "Wowee! this is amazing! I was looking at it purely in terms of aesthetics, beautiful work. It was like the porn I was looking at but far superior to that. It was only when I moved to London that I was aware there were these politics around the black body. I find some of the work problematic but [that's what makes it interesting.]

It's not the black male work that I find most interesting, it's the work he did around S/M or the leather scene.

...

Man in a Polyester Suit, I've read all ... about it and I agree ... but I love the big black dick! ... Desire, fantasies, it's all about contradiction, it's not p.c. and it never will be.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

Speaking of his own *Cock & Glove* (1993), and the way he drew on the fist symbolising the black power movement to create the piece, Ajamu remarked:

It's like Mapplethorpe's work. In some pictures you don't know if he's drawing on the stereotype or subverting the stereotype.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

7.3 Mapplethorpe: ambivalence between suffering and desire

Kobena Mercer has written twice about Mapplethorpe: first to express his unease at the racism implicit in Mapplethorpe's collection of photographs of black

male nudes (*The Black Book*) then being exhibited at the ICA, and the second time, in the wake of right-wing backlash against Mapplethorpe after his death from AIDS-related illness, to revise his initial antagonism and describe his “ambivalence” to the work. Mercer struggles with the hope that Mapplethorpe can be placed in a tradition which has generated black gay work of the 1990s. Placing Mapplethorpe in a more ‘politically correct’⁴ tradition relies partly on Mapplethorpe’s claim to have opened up the topic of the black male nude:

At some point I started photographing black men. It was an area that hadn’t been explored intensively. If you went through the history of male nude photography, there were very few black subjects.

Mapplethorpe, quoted in Mercer 1994, p.196.

Work such as Fani-Kayode’s and Ajamu’s nudes show the influence of cropping and lighting techniques which Mapplethorpe used in his studies of the black male nude and so it is possible to argue that Mapplethorpe initiated a tradition of the black male nude in photography. Their work isn’t racist. It celebrates the black male nude from a black male standpoint. This doesn’t, however, rescue Mapplethorpe’s work from its implicit racism. In the quote Mercer offers, Mapplethorpe goes on to say:

I found that I could take pictures of black men that were so subtle, and the form was so photographic [sic].

ibid.

For Mapplethorpe, black men were a particularly “photographical” *form* rather than politically situated beings. Because he didn’t conscientiously engage with the politics of being black in the same way as he did with the politics of gay male and S/M sexuality, he was drawn into playing along with the politics of being white.

Peggy Phelan’s psychoanalytic analysis of Mapplethorpe’s work fits with Mercer’s earlier framing of it in the Freudian theory of fetishism. For Phelan, Mapplethorpe secures (his own) identity in a same sex sexuality via a fetishistic relationship to the Other-ness of race. She comments on the pose adopted in

⁴ I use this term deliberately to reference the “sex wars” of the 1980s, which were focussed sharply on the question of pornography as Mercer discusses (Mercer, 1994).

the photo of *Leland Richard* (1980): the hands crossed behind the back, and its similarity to the photographer's stance for self-portraits: holding a time-release shutter behind his back⁵.

Mapplethorpe's aestheticization of and love for black men is complex. His work makes use of a racist mythos which exploits the tropes of black male virility and appropriates the history of slavery¹⁵. Mapplethorpe is alert to these implications, if not always suspicious enough about them to make him completely "innocent" as an artist-spectator. In his photographs of black men, Mapplethorpe tries to suggest a symmetrical relationship between the visible image of the black man *in* the frame and the invisible image of the white man behind the camera. In *Leland Richard* (1980), he suggests the possibility of that pose performed by his model, fists behind his back, is also an imitation of Mapplethorpe's own pose as the photographer behind his lens holding a time release shutter. What he risks in establishing this symmetry is that the image of "a black man" turns out to be a portrait of a white man.

Phelan, 1993, p.45 (Phelan's italics) (the footnote 15 refers us to Mercer).

In his revisionist mode, Mercer worries about the mis-application of psychoanalysis out of the field for which it was developed: sexuality, onto questions of race. I think the use of psychoanalytic theory is appropriate here because we are discussing a sexualisation of race; Mapplethorpe's establishment of I-identity through his desiring gaze at someone racially Other-ed. Discourse on race works in a complex manner, not separate from other matrices of power. As Gilroy and Smith show (see Chapter Three), discourse on race as well as that on sexuality may choose to operate through a trope of 'family', of normative heterosexuality. If discursive formations of race and sexuality are not cleanly separated, tools appropriate to one may become useful in the analysis of others.

Both Phelan and Mercer comment on the way in which Mapplethorpe brings the black male nude into a pantheon of ancient Greek sculpture. Phelan points out that Mapplethorpe was originally a sculptor and looked for the three-

⁵ Phelan spoils her analysis at the end of her article by insisting that "sexual objectification of men allows for an ascendancy towards "power"" (Phelan, 1994, p.51) without reflecting that these models are black and gay – marked with value as men but unmarked as black and gay and therefore capable of being visibilised as objects of sexuality.

dimensional in his work. It is hardly surprising, then, that for Mercer, in *Derick Cross* (1983) “the black man’s bum becomes a Brancusi” (Mercer, 1994, p.179). Here, I think, is the crux of Mercer’s ambivalence about Mapplethorpe’s work. In Mapplethorpe’s highly skilled hands, black is beautiful, and it is a great relief to turn from poor photography to his magnificent silvery images, and from images of the black man as an ugly, criminal, sordid being to images of him as a sculpted thing of beauty. However, aside from aesthetic questions of Mapplethorpe’s skill in creating magnificent photographic art, there are ethical questions of the way in which he portrays those whom he photographs. In Mapplethorpe’s hands, black gay men are things of beauty but they are things, and sexualised things. Mercer’s chapter at one point gives us three images of black gay porn star Joe Simmons: Mapplethorpe’s *Thomas* (1986), the cover of *Advocate Men*, October 1988 and the cover of *Artscribe*, November/December 1988. In *Thomas* (1986), Simmons is offered in a full body shot, delicately lit, looking thoughtfully into our eyes, his hands behind his back to centre his unaroused penis in the middle of a very lovely portrait. On the cover of *Advocate Men*, Simmons is shown only as an upper body and head. His expression is mean and rough: there is moustache stubble on his upper lip, he is lit in hard shadows that make his pectoral muscles look bigger. This aggressive masculinity symbolically infers the stereotypical big dick of the black man, as does the leader: “Joe Simmons Hot as a Pistol And Fully Cocked”. On the cover of *Artscribe* (this is also a Mapplethorpe photograph), Simmons is posed so his feet and hands hold the circumference of a circle. He is bent double, his head between his knees staring up at the big dick hidden by his muscular thigh.

In all of these photos, whether they are Mapplethorpe or pornography, Simmons’s big dick is always referenced. Of course, the big dick is also there in Ajamu’s *Cock & Glove* (1993). However, showing the fist wearing a black lace glove and engaged in jerking off deconstructs rather than supports the machismo which is associated with black men supposedly having big dicks. Unlike

Overleaf –

Cock and Glove (1993) from *Black Bodyscapes* catalogue (reproduced by artist’s permission).



Cock & Glove 1993
1/3 edition

Mapplethorpe's work – which Phelan has described as “blissfully” operating without the labour of living with and without women (Phelan, 1993, p.60), *Cock and Glove* (1993) references both the masculine and the normally invisibilised feminine. Aware that super machismo depends on the repudiation of a feminine Other, Ajamu shows the big dick and the clenched fist against the visible lace signifier of femininity. He takes the clenched fist of Black Power and he refuses to ask women to fight for black liberation first, promising that when it is won he will look at women's rights. The lacy feminine is certainly not prone (/passive) here. The deconstruction of black machismo suggests that Ajamu knows racism can't be overcome by political strategies which are always already sexist.

Even though he shows the big black dick of fantasy, Ajamu does so in a way far removed from the complicit manner of the jokey pornographic greeting card which Mercer describes (Mercer, 1994, p.205). The card says: “Everything you ever heard about black men ... is TRUE!” and unfolds from a picture of a black man in a three piece suit by a pot plant to him wearing only an unbuttoned shirt and undone tie, carefully displaying his big dick). Mercer suggests the racism of this card could be undermined if it were exchanged by gay men in an ironic and therefore anti-racist fashion. I think it is intrinsically racist: with pot plants suggesting the jungle and the black man bursting out of the three piece suit of civilisation. Ajamu's *Cock & Glove* (1993) differs from the greeting card because it is always already disrupted by the lace glove of femininity and fantasy, it can only be read as a disruption of the racist fantasy of the big black dick. I wouldn't send it to my gay men friends: black or white, as a tongue-in-cheek birthday card because it says too much.

A third potentially troubling influence on Ajamu's work is sado-masochism⁶. This is the extreme end of queer, offering Ajamu's work a perspective that slides from the mischievous into the wicked. However, there is no delicate understanding in *Kissing the Dust* of the white female nudes as

⁶ Ajamu is critical of the racism of the British S/M scene, where fetishism is understood within a limited vocabulary of rubber and leather. He complained to me, for example, of being refused entry into a fetish club because the doorman wouldn't accept the burka he was wearing as fetish gear.

artistic study without the rude awareness brought by *Black Male Body (Anonymous Negro Fetishist)* (1997).

S/M is about theatre and about playing out a role or an identity. We play roles and identities anyway.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

The queer slant to Ajamu's work derived from sado-masochism is part of what exposes that which we assume to be natural as roles and identities. This understanding isn't solely derived from sources we might find less troubling like black politics.

7.4 Analysis of representative pieces of the work

Gilroy's argument about the ritualised experience of identity and collectivity in music and dance: 'real' time rather than 'reel' time as hooks would have it, is right to be concerned about the shift from a collective and subjective experiential music and dance culture to a video culture which objectifies black identity in a denigratory way. However, it depends on an assumption that the identification experienced in music and dance is unquestionably wholesome. What for most may be a pleasurable expression and constitution of subjective black identity – the pleasure in a performance that follows the insistent call of the imperative to do the performative – may also depend on the regulative discourse of hetero-normativity. To let go of an objectifying assessment of what one is doing in taking part in such an experiential event may not be to open up to the blissful performance of an anti-rational and therefore corpo-real belonging, but rather to painfully surrender heterodox being to a conscriptive and constrictive orthodoxy.

What should be put into question here is not necessarily the objectifying process of thinking about black identity but the way in which it is done. The video culture Gilroy criticises is rife with sexism, homophobia and a kind of self-hating racism. Gilroy quotes the rapper MC Eiht repudiating a black middle class:

Them color-coated ass – I don't even call them Black, they ain't Niggas to me.

quoted in Gilroy, in Thomas (ed.) 1997, p.30.

Recently, black photographer Dennis Morris remarked:

When I was young, if a white person called you nigger you'd break their fucking nose. We fought not to be called nigger, and now, on our records, we call each other nigger and our women ho's and bitches. What hope is there for us?

quoted in *Time Out*, June 21-28 2000.

When MC Eiht uses the term 'nigga', he doesn't turn it as when the term 'black' was turned to read 'black is beautiful'. His use of 'nigga', rather than ironically throw back the denigration implicit in historical usage of the term by white cultures, celebrates the references in it to criminality and vice. Like Gilroy, Morris is disturbed by the hatred of both the black masculine self and black women, which is expressed and experienced in a black music and video culture.

This movement through hatred to a detached sense of the black self is comparable to the racist short cut to detachment taken by 'scientific' objectivity. In Chapter Five I argued that it's possible to reflect objectively in order to come to a subjective understanding of difference. This would allow us to move back out of the panopticon into a happier sense of self. A queer reading transcends the violent conscription of hetero-normativity and constitutes the repudiated Outsider-figure not as a figure of self-hatred instead of hatred by others but as simply another space, equally marked with value as the space which can be created by repudiating it. Where MC Eiht and other video music artists talk about "booty/butt/batty" – as Gilroy remarks, Ajamu reflects on the body. Gilroy's triumvirate uncovers the movement through despite from women's bum to male bum to homosexuality. Ajamu's work reflects on the black male body, with a loving awareness of how it is marked with value against the feminine and the gay; an awareness that also lovingly celebrates the feminine and gay figures against which black masculinity is marked.

Overleaf –

Bodybuilder in a Bra (1990) from cover of *Black Bodyscapes* catalogue (reproduced by artist's permission).



Black Bodyscapes

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AJAMU

7.4.1 *Bodybuilder in a Bra* (1990)

An early working encounter with the world of body-building made a profound impression on Ajamu. His account of it offers us insights into the ways in which the body, race, femininity/masculinity have been inscribed into his life and work.

I wrote this article about the bodybuilder. I went to my first body-building contest. All these guys in the audience screaming. I was actually very surprised. For me that was very very strange A friend of mine was entering the Mr Yorkshire competition and he won and the article's about him.

...

What was very symbolic was going to the competition and seeing all these very muscular masculine men and all these men screaming. Men don't scream at men in this way. Men screaming was something feminine. Maybe that triggered something and then maybe the first image in my exhibition was a bodybuilder [wearing a bra]. Maybe that comes out of seeing that contest, playing with that masculine, feminine.... I always have this thing about subverting how masculine men look anyway. The only pictures I've seen were these lean muscular black men and men I was hanging round with didn't look like that. But then also it goes back to how I used to dress and being told that's not how a man dresses, duduh duduh duduh.

Unpublished interview, July 1997.

The encounter with a scene in which it was possible for men to scream like girls over extreme masculinity was surprising and liberating. It validated Ajamu's instinct towards a queer playing with the binary masculine/feminine. It supported his questioning of the representation of black men. Black men were only represented as lean and muscular, as supremely masculine but Ajamu's black male friends didn't 'really' look like that. (Their actual performance of self-hood was full of mistakes compared to the competent ideal.)

The bodybuilding scene did not offer a social environment in which Ajamu could safely experience homosexual desire – in spite of the girlish screaming at male bodies. Mark Simpson, in his chapter on bodybuilding in *Male Impersonators* (Simpson, 1994), shows that in spite of concerns that focussing on the male body in such an admiring fashion would lead to homosexual desire, bodybuilding has been assimilated into a heterosexual value system by figures

such as Arnold Schwarzenegger. (Simpson describes bodybuilding as a form of narcissism and, ultimately, masochism.)

Out of this early struggle with the polarised binary of masculine/feminine comes the photograph *Bodybuilder in a Bra* (1990), which appears on the cover of the catalogue for the 1994 exhibition *Black Bodyscapes*. We see here the lean muscular back of a black man from the waist up. His upper arms are visible, his arms are raised in a typical body-builder's pose to show off certain of his back muscles. Most of his arms and head are cropped in the photo. His back and the stretched elasticated back of a bra are central. The bra is functional rather than lacy: white, a little crumpled where the body-builder's movement has pulled it about, two tiny bits of the elastic have come unstitched and stick out.

Although the bare back, presence of underwear and melding of masculine and feminine make this potentially an erotic photograph, it is only mildly so. Its power lies in its profound questioning of a polarisation of masculine and feminine. Ajamu's picture does not dispute that masculine and feminine are different. It is the polarisation, the distancing of the two that is questioned. The way in which the body-builder wears the bra suggests he may also be 'wearing' his muscles. What might be regarded, therefore, as a more fundamental part of (black) masculinity: musculature, is revealed as potentially as much a social construction as a piece of clothing.

A comparison between this back and the black back of Mapplethorpe's *Leland Richard* (1980) is productive. There is an important difference beyond Ajamu's refusal to enjoy a "blissful absence" of women in his work. Unusually for Mapplethorpe, *Leland Richard* (1980) is not a beautifully lit, Greek sculpture of a black nude but rather grainy and scratched, like an old newspaper photograph. The crossed arms behind the back suggest handcuffing and racist policing practices or slavery. The photo of a black back positioned in this way brings to mind the many photos of black backs which document the scarring of savage punishment inflicted in slavery or police brutality. The fine unscarred black back of *Leland Richard* (1980) submits to this indignity although the shoulders are

straight and tall. This is a beautiful black back in a fantasy of hand-cuffing, rather than a black man with a cultural history of slavery and police brutality.

In Ajamu's *Bodybuilder in a Bra* (1990), on the other hand, there is a (black) man being photographed, and he is not the crumpled white bra, nor the polished gleam of muscle. The polished gleam suggests something which has been artfully staged for us, and we know this is true. The body-builder has worked to build muscles, has raised his arms in a particular and not very 'natural' way to show them to us and has also oiled his body so his muscles catch the light. At the top of this artificially presented mass of muscle is the nape of the neck. Here there is a roughness of hair, a dark shadow to one side. The set of the head is expressed through the neck. These roughnesses, shadows, ways of setting head and jaw, suggest a personality who can't be put on and shed in the ways of 'feminine' underwear or 'masculine' muscle-tone. Cropping the photograph to allow the intrusion of small details which disrupt the smooth surface of the back allows personality into the frame. Celebrated here is the world of performance "full of mistakes" which Victor Turner thinks offers more material for analysis than the perfect world of competence.⁷

Some of Ajamu's photos from the same era as *Bodybuilder in a Bra* (1990) are self-portraits in which Ajamu is on the point of bursting out laughing. He laughs the particular laugh which actors call 'corpsing' – when the reality of their being breaks unexpectedly through and disrupts their performance with a sense of the ludicrous in performance. 'Corpsing' almost always invites a sympathetic laughter in anyone who witnesses it⁸. As with Mason-John's laugh when she puts on the Georgian dress in imitation of white women imitating black

⁷ Germaine Greer has commented on her former husband's appearance in *Playboy* that what saddened her was that in the photographs all his wrinkles and unsightly quirks were airbrushed out. Those were precisely what she had formerly found erotic in him. (Greer, 1986.)

⁸ In one of the comedian Peter Sellars's *Inspector Clouseau* films, for example, a scene was being filmed in a lift in which Sellars suggested one of the actors should make a farting noise and everyone look suspiciously round at each other. In the first take, Sellars started laughing and spoiled the scene. The other actors also started laughing. Several takes later, the 'corpsing' had become so infectious that as soon as the camera started rolling, the actors would all start laughing and the scene had to be abandoned. A selection of the takes is sometimes shown at the end of the film – as a sort of bon bouche entertainment for an audience whose sympathetic laughter increases as take follows take with the actors increasingly helpless in the grip of a sense of their own performance.

women, this is a laugh going beyond Fanon's smile to Foucault's realisation of the ludicrous, arbitrary nature of taxonomy. It is the laugh of a subjective being engaged in a knowing and happy objective reflection on the performance of self-hood. Here is someone thinking and feeling about sexuality, race, sex/gender, about his body, and he thinks/feels that it's a laugh.

7.4.2 *Black Male Body (Anonymous Negro Fetishist) (1997)*

In *Kissing the Dust*, three museums invited three artists to work with their collections. This was the occasion when I travelled with Ajamu and interviewed him on the coach. Coming back to Huddersfield and his familial black community was one thing for him. We walked the street and bumped into people who addressed him by a different name, people long ago married with children. It was a Friday. Later the town began to gear up to an end-of-the-week night out. Groups of girls collected in skimpy glamorous outfits and groups of men strode out (walking like John Wayne) bent on drinking sprees⁹.

Huddersfield Art Gallery was showing signs of the funding crisis which has hit Britain's arts during the Thatcher and post-Thatcher eras. The gallery in which the *Kissing the Dust* exhibition was hung was a big, elegant space but badly needed redecorating. Little cracks were visible on walls which needed repainting. Small flocks of people, the majority of them white, middle-class and heterosexual, circulated politely chatting with drinks in hand.

Coming back to the local gallery was different for Ajamu to coming back to the town. This is not a place that had a formative influence on his early life.

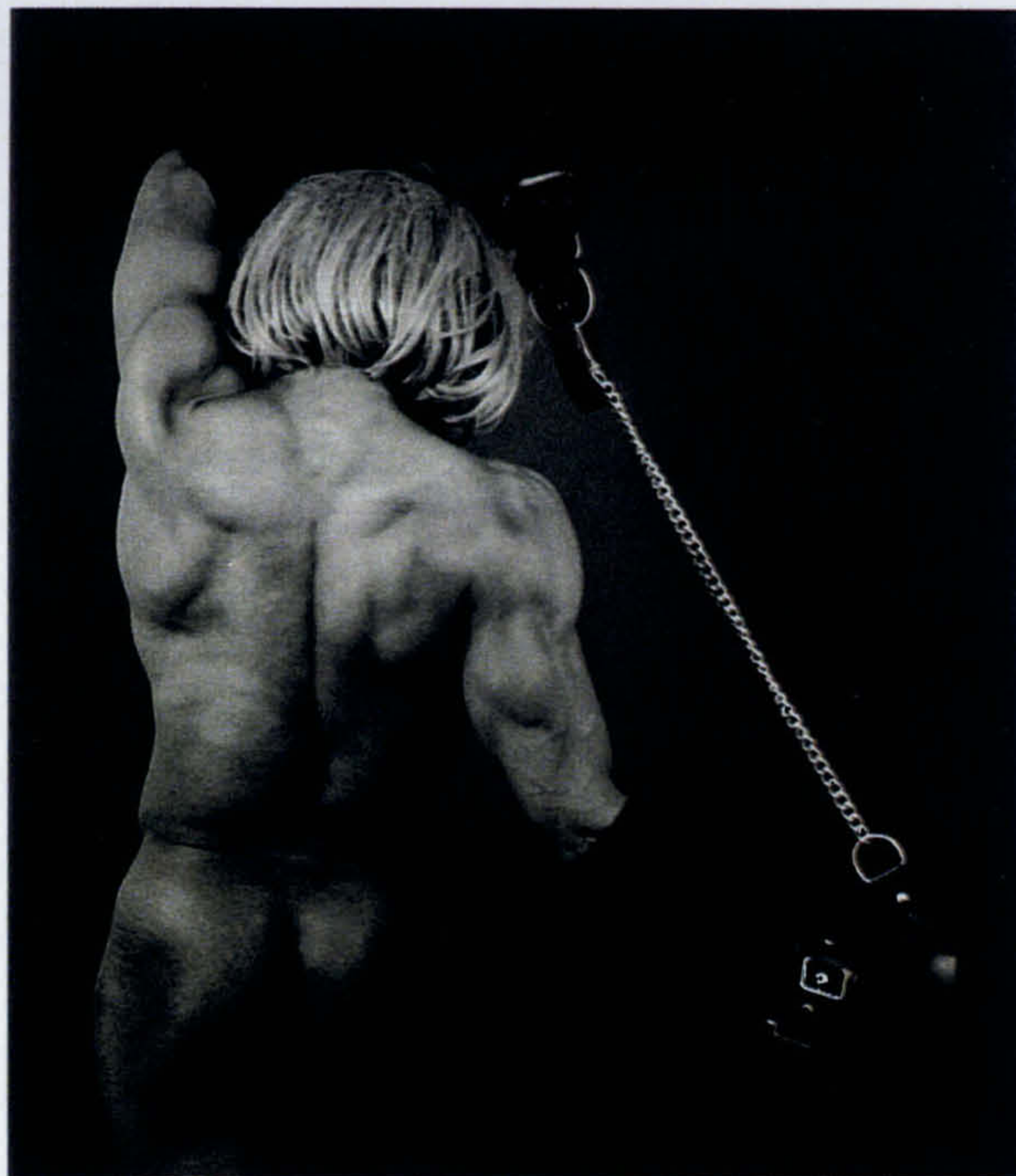
Overleaf –

Black Male Body (Anonymous Negro Fetishist) (1997), together with *The Blue Jacket (1910)* by Henry Scott Tuke, from *Kissing the Dust* catalogue.
(reproduced by permission of the artist and of Huddersfield Art Gallery).

⁹ I was taking the night coach back to London. I passed through town after town where the working week exploded into a brief Friday night out. In London, although weekends are busy, I can party all night, any night of the week. I was fascinated by the vividly different kind of life up North.



'THE BLUE JACKET'
HENRY SCOTT TUKE
OIL ON CANVAS, 1910
530MM X 350MM, GIFT 1972



'BLACK MALE BODY
(ANONYMOUS NEGRO FETISH)'
AJAMU
SILVER GELATINE PRINT, 1996
133MM X 102MM

Being a portrait artist himself, he had deliberately looked out the portraits in the gallery's collections and explicitly sought to expose and fill gaps in representation: the lack of portraits of black women, for example. Less explicit was his aim to subvert the whole experience of consuming European art. Simon Grennan, in his introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition, remarks that in Ajamu's work gaze becomes more reciprocal. Thus Henry Scott Tuke's *The Blue Jacket*: a sentimentalised portrait of a naked white boy from the back (homo-eroticism disguised even in the title), becomes *Black Male Body (Anonymous Negro Fetishist)* (1997). Here, an adult black man is depicted, also from the back, but the sexuality which is indecently masquerading as arcadian innocence in the titillating softness of Tuke's hazy pastel-shaded oils is starkly exposed in the clear outlines and explicit symbolism of Ajamu's black and white photograph.

That the catalogue mis-prints the title of this photograph to read "Black Male Body (Anonymous Negro Fetish)" is a most revealing blunder.¹⁰ Mercer's original argument about Mapplethorpe's fetishism comes powerfully to mind here. For white middle class arts consumers, *The Blue Jacket* and the boy it depicts; *Black Male Body (Anonymous Negro Fetishist)* and the black male body *per se*, are objects for consumption. Ajamu's work disrupts that othering, consuming gaze. The fetishist is a person engaged in an act which pleases himself. We did not expect him to have desire, only to express Desire for us by being a body. Mapplethorpe's fetish has turned himself¹¹. The passive body of a boy, unaware of our gaze and innocent/ignorant of sex has become, not a back turned with wrists held together for the hand-cuffs to fix him as victim/object/Other but an actively sexual body holding a chain like a whip. Nor is the active sexuality that of a stereotypical black man (= big dick); we can't read him as Enoch Powell's fetishistic bugaboo "the black man holding the whiphand", because he is wearing a blonde, feminine wig. This is someone playing with a sophisticated

¹⁰ In Chapter Five I described how easily feminists seeking to overturn racist thought can end by reproducing it. It's important to remember here that Huddersfield Art Gallery was part of the group who commissioned Ajamu to produce the work for this exhibition, and that they gave him open access to their resources.

¹¹ He has turned himself in a Foucauldian "reverse discourse" in the same way as the terms 'queer' and 'black' have been turned.

understanding of sex (race, gender) who knows we are watching – vide the tension of those back muscles. We are not drawn into the picture as the titillated secret voyeurs and voyeuses of an object any more but openly invited to play with a knowing subject.

7.4.3 *Nadine Cockburn (1999)*

On the eve of the twenty-first century, the sexual play of queer politics seemed to hesitate and ask itself “What do I mean?”. Peter Tatchell (formerly of Outrage) is still at war with the conformist politics of Stonewall. In a huge interview-based article in *The Guardian*, the media failed again to understand that he doesn’t want to be accepted into the normality that is heterosexuality¹². In an era named after a potentially fatal medical condition, sexually transmitted primarily between gay men, ‘queer’ has yet survived, but the politics of pleasure rooted in a liberation of sexual mores which were seen to structure our society feels stale to some. On the one hand, many of us have grown accustomed to queer and are no longer shocked by pictures of a black cock and a black lace glove. On the other hand, vast tracts of Britain remain unaware of even the most wishy washy of liberatory sexual politics and are still shocked by the revelation that people have same sex sex.

For Ajamu, queer art had to move beyond the playful exposure of a taken-for-granted hetero-normativity through the shock value of sex. In the mischievous search for new shibboleths to de-bunk, Ajamu took up the grotesque.

Overleaf –

Nadine Cockburn (1999), from *AntiBodies: a spectacle of strangeness* catalogue (reproduced by artist’s permission).

¹² “Anyone who attempts to rally parliamentary support for homosexual reform with the slogan “Drop Your Trousers and Bend Over for your Member” cannot expect much serious consideration of his pamphlet on the limits of legal equality.” *The Guardian* remarks pompously. They fail to understand that it is axiomatic in queer to take play seriously.



Nadine Cockburn, the bearded girl, at the age of 13,
Huddersfield 110 × 85 mm

In tackling the grotesque, Ajamu felt he was taking up an issue he had not sufficiently come to grips with: (dis)ability. The body beautiful which he had observed wrongly used to represent black masculinity, is also the object of fetishistic worship in white gay male culture (“Glossed images of gay men portray a white but sun-tanned physical virility, that through its sheer abdominal strength (one could be forgiven for thinking) would ward away HIV infection.” Dylan Joshua Potter remarks in the catalogue to Ajamu’s *Anti/Bodies: a spectacle of strangeness*). Ajamu wanted to build on his earlier critique of representations of this body beautiful through working with the issue of (dis)ability. He saw ‘freakishness’ as an area of common ground for disabled and black peoples. He saw what we might call « profondes analogies » between three groups of people stigmatised as ‘cripples’, ‘niggers’, ‘queers’, and represented as circus freaks.

As critiques of de Beauvoir’s analogies argue, the comparison of the situations of different peoples is potentially problematic. Nor did *Anti/Bodies* at first viewing reassure me. I had spoken with Ajamu about the project at its early stages; copied chunks of Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* for him; taken him to see Toichi Nakata’s *Minoru and Me*¹³. Then I didn’t see much of Ajamu until the private view. The show was in a gallery in Hoxton. (This was at the time when Hoxton was being developed as a trendy artistic quarter and property values rocketing in between large Hackney Council housing estates.) Rough white-washed walls housed Sunil Gupta’s new work *From Here to Eternity*, which explores the physical geography of London’s gay scene and the emotional geography of his own HIV+ status. Ajamu’s work was shown in a small room to the side, hung with red Victorian wallpaper.

Ajamu’s work combined photographs of black circus ‘freaks’ from archives with photo-montage so that it was hard to tell what was real. At first that made me confused and angry. I was also still anxious that the comparison of able-

¹³ The film is about Toichi’s friend Minoru, who has cerebral palsy, and who came to visit Toichi in London, partly in order to tell Toichi he is gay. It documents with poignant clarity the break-down in their friendship precipitated by the filming process, with a final reconciliation (at Minoru’s request) to complete the film.

bodied black identity to disability was a co-option, a colonisation of the vulnerable situation of physical disability. But what is reality?

I don't know if the portrait of Nadine Cockburn was taken by Ajamu or not. I don't know if there 'really' was a bearded black girl in Huddersfield, or if this is a Victorian fake, or if it is 'really' one of Ajamu's manipulated photographs. I don't need to know these personal details which would fix Nadine Cockburn for me, reify her body as a symbol of 'real' black disabled woman-hood. What is typically Ajamu's style is the way the eyes slide sideways to meet our gaze, and how the hunched shoulders express the person. The 'freakishness' of the girl: her beard, is neither central nor easy to see. We can't consume her as a freak/object, but, as with the bodybuilder and the fetishist, must engage with her as the subject of emotional experience. We recognise in the uneasiness of the sideways look, the hunched shoulders, our own guilt/responsibility. It is our gaze which elicits this suspicion and shyness. Like the 'look' that puts working-class people 'in their place', this gaze situates her, not as Nadine Cockburn, but as a freak. It thereby situates us as the body beautiful.

This style in Ajamu's work marks a crucial stage in the development of queer politics. Here, he is not engaged in an ironic working on his own experience of black gay masculinity which exposes the operation of hegemonic discourse. He is not working from a black standpoint, with double vision or double consciousness or double-voiced discourse. Ajamu is attempting to take his understanding of freakishness from the freak's perspective and apply it to the situation of anOther freak. He is looking at Nadine Cockburn as an able-bodied black man looking at a disabled black woman.

Unlike Mapplethorpe, he doesn't attempt to produce his own I-identity through constituting Nadine Cockburn the same but simultaneously Other. Her pose in the photograph is not in the least reminiscent of the pose of the photographer making a self-portrait. Neither is Ajamu as photographer invisible in the fashion of the 'scientific' style dismissed by feminists as the 'God trick'. Nadine Cockburn's look locates him: there where we are now standing, staring at her.

This is not the re-application of standpoint epistemology either. As in *Cock and Glove* (1993), Ajamu's understanding of feminism has not been arrived at by comparing it to a personal understanding of race politics derived from the experience of suffering. What Ajamu has done is to laugh at himself. In earlier work, he thought about how he felt about his experience of pornography to produce a black gay male double-voiced discourse of black male nude photography. Here he has thought about how he felt about his experience of masculinity and able-bodiedness with ironic reflection. Instead of constituting his I-identity by repudiating the feminine or disabled as Outsider-figures or possessing them as fetishes, he has reflected on the mimetic character of ability so that Nadine Cockburn (not the mirror-image of Ajamu) looks out at his ability and masculinity.

7.5 Conclusion

Ajamu's early experience of the discursive ritual production of a black masculine identity was uncomfortable partly because that identity was also being produced as heterosexual. Various influences: an awareness of black masculinity as embodied practices, the importance of pornography as a rare realm where he could experience being black and gay, focussed his attention on the body.

The pieces of work by Ajamu which I looked at here span the 1990s. They reveal again that it is at the point where different processes of identification intersect that our identity is produced, rather than in singular monolithic blocks of being. Like Agbabi, Mason-John and the artists I discussed in Chapter Five, Ajamu is profoundly influenced by politics and by the validation of both pleasure and abjected bodies which is axiomatic in queer.

Unlike Mapplethorpe's black male nude studies, Ajamu's work through incorporated knowledge gained in suffering rather than a fetishistic process of self-hood. Like Mapplethorpe's work, and like that of my other participants, Ajamu's is transfigured by a celebration of desire.

Some of Ajamu's work can be thought of as subversive. As a man, he has the power to change the way in which masculine is defined against a repudiated feminine. When he lovingly celebrates the feminine against which black masculinity is marked with power instead of repudiating it, he subverts machismo in himself.

This subversive moment happens in part because of the kind of standpoint understanding which Agbabi offers in *The Black The White and The Blue* as a political strategy. In thinking of profound analogies between the gay, the black and the disabled, Ajamu succeeds in photographing Nadine Cockburn as a shy subject, not the object of our gaze. Subversion also happens here because of a queer perspective. Willingness to celebrate what society regulates against leads Ajamu, like Agbabi, Mason-John, Dar, Sekhon, Poulomi, to question what hegemony seeks to hide. In black and gay performance this can normally only be translated for others to act on but sometimes the artist finds the discursive formation s/he is questioning is one where s/he has dominant power, and responds to an exhilarating compulsion for change from within.

Conclusion

There are two main contributions offered by *Feeling for Politics*.

The thesis provides the first full academic account of the lived experience of those defined black and gay in Britain. Drawing on a catholic collection of academic work and the media reports on two key figures, I have given a sense of ritual and political discourse which is sustained by the black and queer figures it repudiates. I have provided analyses of performance material, supported by biographical accounts, which explore the being of black and gay in multiple identities. As Smyth points out, Perinder Sekhon's photograph places a South Asian butch identity in specific socio-economic circumstances. Poulomi's portrayals of the "purposive" dressing up of South Asian drag queens enacting transgressive identity in cultural traditions, reveal that it is only at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality that we can understand the effects which these vectors of power achieve.

The second main contribution of my thesis is a theory that begins to comprehend the full complexities of contemporary power which Butler problematises so helpfully. Through an understanding of experience drawn from queer activism, I interrogate the rules of her dilemma: not to foreground or subsume one vector of power, nor to assume anyone can fully stand for that complexity. I argue that each of us does in fact represent the full complexities of contemporary power, in a mixture of subordinate and dominant identification. A queer concept of perspective as inflected by engaged political thought rather than standpoint suggests that for those in a position of dominance – as for those in a position of subordination – it is possible to work through experience to understanding.

The performance material I draw on does manage representation of very complex and specific intersections of identity. The gay white racist policeman who desires an Asian man, the muscular gay Asian man who kisses a policeman's lips, the South Asian drag queen who is a drag queen whether that's transgressive or chic, the aristocratic black woman, the black male subjectivated

by his desire instead of ours, these mobile identities insist on appearing in performance whether theory can comprehend them or not.

Academic theory has recently begun to overcome the contradiction implied in thinking bodies. Through such turns of thought as the feminist category of experience and Bourdieu's incorporated knowledge and embodied practices, the corporeal is becoming a part of how we work, rather than the body being something material on which we could go to work. I utilise these approaches in a Foucauldian frame of discourse and matrices of power. This brings together awareness of on the one hand the ubiquity of power and on the other hand the body, enabling better understanding of how we do identities.

The understanding of black and gay lived experience can only be achieved on the basis of theories which do comprehend the full complexities of contemporary power. A comparison of different feminist attempts to incorporate race politics suggests three things. Firstly, we should be diffident about our efforts to take on any project to dismantle prejudice, since it is all too easy to fall into an inadvertent *doxa* of prejudice even while trying to interrogate it. Secondly, if we are not theorising on the basis of personal experience (of suffering), as in standpoint epistemologies, it is easier to work in an 'arena' of some kind. Thirdly, we should utilise that arena, as do my participants with their arena of performance, not to fix an Object for our analysis, but to focus on dynamic relations of identification. These are likely to be a Derridean supplementarity.

My thesis shows that the theory of identities can't be managed in a single frame of thought. The specifics of each vector of power must be respected.

Following Butler and Althusser, I argue that the material modality of the "paving-stone or rifle" is not important in thinking of sex/gender. Agbabi's work supports this argument. I accept Butler's formulation gender as performative and also that gender is interpellated as binary in a power matrix of heterosexuality. As she says, this intersection of identification is racialised. Agbabi's policeman and Asian man are called into being male in a discourse that establishes both nation and family by repudiating the black and the queer.

In his attempts to put a label to the vector of racialisation, Stuart Hall has called it both a lens through which social crisis is perceived (Hall, 1978) and a floating signifier (Hall, 1996). What these two metaphors share is a sense of race as something which is used to shape things. Like Du Bois, we are still moving away from "color, hair and bone" to consider forces dividing us into groups as arbitrary as the ones in Borges's encyclopaedia which caused Foucault such liberatory mirth. I think of the divisive forces of racism, the collective forces of black community and culture. The performance material I work with suggests that – as with gender and sexuality – it is at intersections of identification that these become apparent, that attempting to isolate race as a vector of power can only reify it. It's as a gay British Asian drag queen that Dar comprehends the cultural specificities of his situation. 'British Asian' seems like a cultural anomaly to some people and this means Dar is not treated as an equal citizen in either India or Britain. The culture of sexuality means that even the British Asian community collects itself together by shutting him out.

My analysis of Mason-John's performance piece continues this exploration of intersections of identity. Mason-John shows how race, class and gender politics work to support white upper class male identity. Bourdieu's *habitus* and the four kinds of capital (social, economic, cultural, symbolic) offer here a "more accurate diagnosis" of class relations than the Marxism Gilroy finds dissatisfying.

My analysis of Ajamu's work considers the realms in which multiple identities iterate and generate being. Although ritual realms offer the pleasure of collectivity, I argue that not everyone can experience being in ritual – by its very nature. Like my other participants, Ajamu turns to thinking through the creation of more incorporative realms of being.

One of the subsidiary contributions made by my thesis is towards a more participant-oriented research approach. In certain circumstances, it is apparent that a level of experiential understanding outstrips that of theoretical capabilities. In this situation I argue that an approach engaged with participants' reflections

on their own, my own and academic thinking has been more rewarding – if harder work. A uni-directional analysis of participants' thinking as data through academic thinking doesn't respond as well to the richness of that participant data.

In the course of my research I have also developed some guidelines for the sensitive handling of fieldwork material which is deeply personal. Following Geertz and Rosaldo, I believe that a fieldwork relationship can be a long-term relationship of respect and friendship. Provided this is managed as a responsible and ethical method, it offers protection for the participant, allowing h/er to contribute personal material on the understanding that it remains in h/er control until s/he is happy with it. I am critical of classic anthropological 'objectivity', but only in order to recover through queer perspectives the attention to detail and the embodied practices of ethnography.

My thesis explores in some detail the nature of performance. Following Phelan, I argue that performance is an inherently political space. I add that it is one where the body and emotions are primary. I accept Gilroy's argument that where "visuality" dominates, performance loses its radical potential but I argue that this doesn't depend on a face to face interaction between audience and the artist's actual body. I argue that artists can translate incorporated knowledge such that they sustain a collaborative input from the audience.

Feeling for Politics works in an area where very little previous research has been done and there are therefore several important projects which had to be either sketched or merely flagged in its progression. The most obvious is the his/herstory, which is fragmented and partial. A project is under way to put the chronology (Appendix I) and associated material on the internet. This might also encourage contact with global gay networks, allowing for both the cross-cultural comparison of ambiguous sexuality suggested by Douglas's work, and the development and wider recognition of gay his/herstories from other cultures (such as Giti Thadani's *Sakhiyani*).

I also signalled a need for studies of the British performance tradition and black religious institutions in Britain. Turner and Gluckman have suggested studies of ritual in terms of psycho-analysis might offer interesting insights and following my argument that identity is often generated or repudiated in ritual, I repeat that suggestion here.

Since performances are still ahead of theory, they also signal a vector of power which has remained under-theorised: that of (dis)ability. Here, a distinction between the mental and corporeal, and embodied practices in that material modality in which Butler is not interested, may raise awkward and useful questions for postmodern thought and – once more – for feminist understanding. I didn't explore theoretically in this thesis the way in which identification is modulated by age. Mac an Ghail's work on young people in schools could be supported by work on young people's experience of race and sexuality politics outside school (Section 28 permitting), and work with older black and gay people.

To sustain the activist spirit of queer which I have celebrated in *Feeling for Politics* it is necessary to translate its findings as a challenge to government policy. I identify many areas which, in the wake of New Right hegemony, remain under-resourced. My thesis contains arguments which justify Greater London Council policies, show the social importance of the arts and critique politico-discursive formations. These could be extrapolated and addressed to policy-makers through more accessible documents for government 'think tanks'.

Feeling for Politics argues that the performance work of those who are defined black and queer is rarely subversive. Rather, it translates incorporated knowledge – knowledge gained in the experience of suffering – through a trope of desire. Working in the politics of pleasure that is queer, some of those who are excessive and abjected beings in a heterosexual economy choose to celebrate their ambiguous status. In the queer understanding which privileges neither suffering nor power but validates the idea of working to position yourself as queer, they translate their incorporated knowledge. They do so not to offer

community feeling but to reach diverse audiences – black and white, gay and straight, some of whom are sufficiently empowered to initiate subversion – in the belief that there exist multiple identities which should challenge with passion and beauty the previously static order

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Appendix I: Chronology of events of significance.

1965

James Baldwin's *Blues for Mr Charlie* plays in London.

1970s

Black lesbian blues parties held in cities throughout Britain

1978

Brixton Black Women's Group (London) takes up the idea of establishing a Black Women's Centre in London.

February Organisation of Women of Africa and African Descent (OWAAD) launched as an umbrella national Black group.

Winter OWAAD becomes Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent. First conference attended by 250 women.

1979

Brixton Black Women's Centre (London).

Southall Black Sisters (London) formed by women of Asian and African descent.

James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* published in London by Michael Joseph.

July FOWAAD (OWAAD newsletter) first issue.

1980

OWAAD second conference held over two days and attended by 600 women.

1981

Gay Asian Group becomes Gay Black Group (London). Later becomes Lesbian and Gay Black Group and founds Black Lesbian and Gay centre project.

Peckham Black Women's Group (London) formed to include women of African and Asian descent; later sets up a centre.

OWAAD third annual conference (London). 40 Black lesbians gather for the first lesbian workshop. The conference is divided over the issue of lesbianism.

1982

Black Lesbian Group, Britain's first. Although meetings happen in London, lesbians from all over the country attend. Folded.

March Outwrite Women's Newspaper first issue.

June OWAAD last conference attempts to bring women together with the focus on Black feminism. OWAAD folds.

1983

Black Womataalk, a group of women of African and Asian descent, comes together to form a publishing co-operative.

Chinese Lesbian Group formed by three lesbians who meet at the Lesbian Sex and Sexual Practice conference.

Black Lesbian Support Network, national network acting as a contact point for women.

Camden Black Lesbian Group formed.

Publication of *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*, a children's book about a gay male couple and their daughter which causes backlash from conservative family elements.

1984

Asian Women's Writers Collective provides support to new writers, skill-sharing, performances and outreach.

Black Women's Discos held monthly at South London Women's Centre. Folded.

LESPOP (Lesbians and Policing Project) gives advice, information and runs workshops.

Spring *Mukti* Asian feminist magazine first issue. Folded.

April Black Women and Media national conference (London); practical skill-sharing and discussion forum.

May We Are Here: Black Feminists in Britain national conference (London) attended by 250 women.

June First International Feminist Bookfair. Barbara Burford, Audre Lorde and Suniti Namjoshi discuss their writing.

July *We Are Here: Black Feminist Newsletter* first issue.

Autumn Feminist Review publishes 'Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives' (no. 17). It includes a discussion between four Black lesbians.

Mid 1980s

Camden Black Lesbian Group (London) joins with Camden Lesbian Project.

Latin American Lesbian Group (London).

1985

Zami Black feminist bi-monthly magazine (Coventry) first issue. Folded.

Black Lesbian and Gay Centre Project (London) gets mainstream funding to establish a centre.

Peckham Black Women's Centre (London).

'Lesbians from Historically Immigrant Communities', research by a Black lesbian of Turkish descent funded by the Greater London Council.

Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group established from work by Black lesbian conducting LHIC research.

BLASIA (London) group for Black lesbians of Asian descent. Folded.

Publication of *A Dangerous Knowing: four black women poets*. (Barbara Burford, Gabriela Pearse, Grace Nichols and Jackie Kay). Sheba Feminist Press.

My Beautiful Laundrette (dir. Stephen Fears, writer Hanif Kureshi) partly funded by Channel 4, is a surprise hit movie.

Territories (dir. Isaac Julien).

September Black Lesbian Group (London) meets at Waltham Forest Women's Centre. Folded.

October *Zami* I first national Black lesbian conference (London) attended by over 200 women of African and Asian descent.

1986

Publication of *Beautiful Barbarians* by Onlywomen Press.

We Are Here: Black Feminist Newsletter folds.

Brixton Black Women's Centre (London) folds due to funding cuts and because the building was condemned.

The Passion of Remembrance (dir. Isaac Julien and Maureen Blackwood).

April Camden Lesbian Centre/Black Lesbian Group (London) granted planning permission for the country's first lesbian centre.

April Lesbian and Gay Unit, the first in the country, set up in Haringey (London) and employs black lesbian workers.

1986/7

Black Lesbian Support Network folds.

1987

Black Lesbian and Gay Group (Leicester).

Cypriot Lesbian and Gay Group (London).

Publication of Barbara Burford's short stories and novella in *The Threshing Floor*, Sheba Feminist Press.

March Challenging Heterosexism in Our Communities conference (London) co-organised by Black Lesbian and Gay Centre.

May Smash the Backlash national demonstration (London) against homophobic and racist attitudes/action. 4,000 march.

June Black Womantalk publishes its first book, *Black Women Talk Poetry*.

October First National Black Gay Men's Conference held in London.

November Racism and AIDS conference organised by Brent Council and London Strategic Policy Unit (Commonwealth Institute, London).

1988

Local Government Act 1987-1988, includes Section 28: *Prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or publishing material*. (Haringey Black Action join activist demonstrations).

We Are Here: Black Feminist Newsletter (Leicester) relaunched.

Shakti network (London) for South Asian lesbians, gays and bisexuals.

Black Lesbians and Gay People of Faith (London) as a space for those from any religion.

African/Caribbean Lesbian Group (London).

Publication of *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* by Sheba Feminist Press, editors Shabnam Grewel, Jackie Kay, Lilian Landor, Gail Lewis and Pratibha Parmar.

Publication of Dorothea Smartt's chapter 'From My Eyes ... Zami Publishing Poetry 1984-1988' and Giti Thadani's 'Anamika' in *What Lesbians Do in Books*, edited by Elaine Hobby, published by Women's Press.

OLGA – conference with black caucus.

This is Not an AIDS Advertisement (dir. Isaac Julien).

Looking for Langston (dir Isaac Julien). Made partly with Channel 4 funding.

1989

Black Lesbians Brought Up In Care Group (London). Folded.

International Black Lesbians Group to offer support to and from those born overseas.

Black Lesbian Group (Birmingham).

Linda King taken on by Lesbian Archive and Information Centre to address failure to include black lesbian material. Publishes a report at the end of her 4 week consultancy.

Outwrite Women's Newspaper folds.

We Are Here: Black Feminist Newsletter (Leicester) (1988) folds.

April Zami II second national Black lesbian conference (Birmingham) held over two days and attended by over 200 women.

Lightskinned/mixed-race black lesbian group (London) formed after a workshop at Zami II. Later formed MOSAIC (1991).

Late 1980s

Women in Shakti (London).

Young Black Zamis (London), part of youth project North London Line.

Onyx (London), group for lesbians of colour.

Young Black Lesbian Group (London) formed as part of Lewisham Young Women's Project.

Over 40s Black Lesbian Group (London). Now called Message to Martha (1998).

Zamimass (London) set up initially to organise an alternative Christmas celebration, continued as a monthly group.

Early 1990s

Clubs such as Asia at the Paradise Club, Pressure Zone and Shugs.

Sauda – black women only night at the London Women's Centre.

Onyx group (late 1980s) folds.

1990

Orientations group for lesbians and gays of Chinese and South East Asian descent (London).

Sixth International Lesbian and Gay People of Colour Conference held in London, attended by 300 people from all over the world.

Ajamu's work presented as part of *Different Circles*, Brixton Art Gallery, London.

LESPOP (Lesbians and Policing Project) (London) folds due to loss of funding.

Peckham Black Women's Group and Black Women's Centre (London) folds due to loss of funding.

Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (1985) folds due to burn-out.

Black Lesbians and Gay People of Faith (London) (1988) folds.

African/Caribbean Lesbian Group (London) (1988) folds.

International Black Lesbian Group (1989) folds.

Young Black Zamis (late 1980s) folds.

October Justin Fashanu comes out as gay in *The Sun* newspaper. The ensuing homophobic articles, especially those in *The Voice*, lead to the formation of Black Lesbians and Gays Against Media Homophobia (BLAGAMH).

1991

Black Lesbian Group (Nottingham).

Black Lesbian and Gay Group (Birmingham).

Black Lesbian and Gay Helpline, open one night a week.

MOSAIC for lesbians and gay men of mixed racial heritage (London) formed.

First Asian lesbian conference held in Bangkok. A group set up which also issues a quarterly publication *Asian Lesbians Outside of Asia* (ALOA).

Publication of *Don't Ask Me Why: An Anthology of Short Stories by Black Women*, Black Womantalk.

Publication of *The Adoption Papers* by Jackie Kay, Bloodaxe Books.

Release of cassette *Zamisounds, Pride and Prejudice: An Empowering Recording of Black Lesbian Creativity* by Zamimass Planning Committee.

Ajamu has solo exhibition at Centerprise Community Centre, London.

Ajamu's work presented as part of *Value for Culture*, Black Art Gallery, London, *1st Open Gay Pride Show*, Kennington Park, London and *Dream Fantasies*, Brixton Art Gallery, London.

Zahid Dar coreographs and dances solo in the film *Threading Time*.

June Adeola's cassette *Crystal Visions*, ShANGO music.

1992

Ajamu has solo exhibition at Home Studio, London.

Ajamu's work presented as part of *Critical Decade*, Cave Arts Centre, Birmingham and *From Where I Stand*, Brixton Art Gallery, London.

Vega Lloyd's *In Our Own Image: Black Male Photography* published by Vega Press, includes work by Ajamu.

Essex Hemphill tour of Britain *Identities*.

September Northern Black Lesbian conference (Manchester) attended by over 100 women.

November Black Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Group (Bristol).

1993

MOSAIC conference for lesbians and gays of mixed heritage (London).

Iranian Lesbian and Gay Group (London).

Publication of the first book specifically about black lesbians *Making Black Waves* by Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta in the *Lesbians Talk* series (Scarlet Press).

Publication of *Lesbian Poetry from 'Word Up', Words from the Women's Café*, by Centerprise Community Centre, includes poetry by Avril Rogers-Wright, Lim Aii Ling, Patience Agbabi, Maya Chowdhry, Valerie Mason-John, Dorothea Smartt, Michelle Asha Warsama.

Publication of *Other Lovers* by Jackie Kay (Bloodaxe Books).

Publication of Labi Siffre's poetry collection *Nigger* by Xavier Books.

Ajamu has solo exhibition at First Out, London.

Ajamu's work presented as part of *Acquisitions*, Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation, New York, *2nd Gay Photo Show*, Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation, New York and *Recontres Au Noir*, Theatre Antique, Arles Photographic Festival, France.

March Zami Network International Women's Day Festival (Birmingham) day of workshops and discussions.

1994

Quim, the S/M magazine, guest-edited by Black lesbian performer and writer Leonora Rogers-Wright.

London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival shows black films in quantity for the first time.

Publication of Kobena Mercer's book *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* by Routledge.

Ajamu has solo exhibitions at Aytoun Gallery, Manchester, Huddersfield Art Gallery, Huddersfield and Camerawork, London.

Ajamu's work presented as part of *Diamonds, Gold, Myrrh*, Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation, New York, *Strangers in Paradise*, Foto Instituut, Rotterdam, and *Brothers and Lovers*, Hallam University Gallery, Sheffield.

Toichi Nakata's documentary *Osaka Story* shown at the London International Film Festival.

1995

Publication of *Talking Black: Lesbians of African and Asian Descent Speak Out*, edited by Valerie Mason-John by Cassell.

Publication of Patience Agbabi's poetry collection *R.A.W.* by Gecko Press.

Ajamu has solo exhibition at Pinacoteca Do Estado, Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Ajamu's work presented as part of *Glasgay Photographic Festival*, Glasgow, Scotland and *Objects/Subjects of Desire*, Konstack National School of Art/Design, Stockholm, Sweden.

Publication of Emmanuel Cooper's *Fully Exposed: Male Nude in Photography* by Routledge includes photographs by Ajamu.

Steven Mayes's article 'Britain's Top 200 Gay Men and Lesbians' Queer Photography' in *Gay Times* includes photographs by Ajamu.

Publication of Karen Knorr's *Objects/Subjects of Desire* by Paletten, Stockholm includes photographs by Ajamu.

The Homecoming (dir. Topher Campbell) – a film about Ajamu, commissioned by the Arts Council.

Fierce Sisters on the Stage (dir. Paloma Etienne), about British and American black lesbian performance poetry.

February *Osaka Story* shown at ICA.

June Lesbian and Gay Pride in London closes with Labi Siffre singing *Something Inside So Strong*.

June *Osaka Story* shown on BBC2's *Fine Cut* series.

1996

Ajama's work presented as part of *Prospect 96*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany and *Imagine ... Ourselves in Our World*, City Art Gallery, Leeds.

Publication of Peter Horne and Reina Lewis's *Outlooks – Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Culture* by Routledge includes work by Ajamu.

Zahid Dar directs and performs the monologue (*That hateful chant*) *Pakiboy*, written for him by Tenebris Light, at the Oval House Studio Theatre, London.

June Valerie Mason-John co-hosts main stage at London's Pride Festival.

August Anita Naoko Pilgrim awarded a grant by the Economic and Social Research Council to conduct doctoral research at Goldsmiths College, University of London, under the title *Identity and community for British 'black' gay men and lesbian women*, starting September 1996.

1997

Ajama's work presented as part of *In Visible Light: Photography and Classification in Art, Science and the Everyday* (Touring Exhibition – Museum of Modern Art –Oxford, Museum Villa Stuck – Munich, Museum of Contemporary Art – Sydney).

Publication of Deborah Bright's *The Passionate Camera* by Routledge includes work by Ajamu.

February Zahid Dar presents performance piece and paper 'How to be an Asian Drag Queen and live to tell the tale' at University of West of England conference.

June Zahid Dar directs *The Silence*, a play by Barry Stone, at The Live Theatre, Newcastle.

July *Kissing The Dust: Artists Working Collections*, three artists working in three galleries to produce new bodies of work, including the photographer Ajamu.

1998

Publication of Nina Rapi and Maya Chowdhry's collection *Acts of Passion: Sexuality, Gender and Performance* as both a book and a special issue of *Journal of Lesbian Studies* by Hawarth Press (USA), includes chapters by Adeola Agbebiyi 'Fo(u)r Women: the Art of Collaboration', Maya Chowdhry 'Living Performance', Savitri Hensman 'Presentation of the Self as Performance: The Birth of Queenie aka Valerie Mason-John' and Anita Naoko Pilgrim ' Shall We Dance?: Identification Through Linguistic Tropes and Performance'.

Summer Justin Fashanu commits suicide over allegations of under-age sex.

September Publication of Anita Naoko Pilgrim's chapter 'Blackening My Characters: Race and Characterisation in Lesbian Prose Fiction' in Elaine Hutton's *Beyond Sex and Romance?: Lesbian Prose Fiction*, Women's Press.

September The Second International Transgender Film & Video Festival at Lux Cinema, London, focusses on cross-cultural and trans-global expressions of transgender and features work by and about Native American 'Two Spirit' people, India's hijra community and transgender people of Latin America.