

# En un instante: la teoría de la representación como crítica queer/feminista de la violencia

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## RESUMEN

El presente artículo analiza distintos acercamientos que las teorías feministas y *queer* presentan frente a las categorías de género. Si bien las primeras buscan rotular explícitamente la femineidad y la masculinidad, las segundas cuestionan el sistema binario de género. No obstante, ambos cuerpos teóricos son confrontados cuando se trabaja la violencia: ¿Cómo nombrar la masculinidad de un victimario sin naturalizar el orden sexual? ¿Qué función puede cumplir la violencia en los procesos de género? La autora utiliza la representación "*Who wants to, can come*" para ejemplificar los medios sensoriales de las construcciones de género. La vista, el sonido y el movimiento son recursos empleados para irritar la percepción de la audiencia y, así, su acercamiento a la dicotomía tradicional de los sistemas de género.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

*Género, queer, representación, teatro.*

## In One Breath: Performance Theory as a *Queer*/Feminist Critique of Violence

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the different approaches to gender categories in feminist and *queer* theories. Whereas feminist theories seek to explicitly label femininity and masculinity, *queer* theories look to undermine the binary system of gender. When it comes to violence, however, both bodies of theories run into difficulty. How can a perpetrator's maleness be named without naturalizing the sexual order? What might the function of violence be in the processes of producing genders? The performance "*Who wants to, can come*" exemplifies a way of constructing gender through senses. Sight, sound and movement are used to irritate the audience's perception of, and thus their approach to, the traditional dichotomy of gender systems.

### KEY WORDS

*Gender, queer, performance, theater.*

## Em um instante. A teoria da representação como crítica *queer*/feminista à violência

### RESUMO

Este artigo analisa as diversas aproximações que as teorias feministas e *queer* apresentam frente às categorias de gênero. Embora as primeiras procurem etiquetar explicitamente a femineidade e a masculinidade, as segundas questionam o sistema binário de gênero. Ainda que ambos os corpos teóricos sejam confrontados quando se trabalha a violência: Como denominar a masculinidade de um verdugo sem naturalizar a ordem sexual? Que função pode desempenhar a violência nos processos de gênero? A autora utiliza a peça "*Who wants to, can come*" para exemplificar os meios sensoriais das construções de gênero. A vista, o som e o movimento são recursos empregados para irritar a percepção da audiência e, assim, sua aproximação à dicotomia tradicional dos sistemas de gênero.

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*Gênero, queer, representação, teatro.*

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**Q**ueer/feminist movements of thought aim to change the very power relations on which discrimination and violence are founded<sup>1</sup>. This pertains to all social spheres including the sciences and their institutions: *queer/feminist* movements criticize structures of dominance and in doing so they intentionally disrupt the symbolic order of academia. These movements are not conceived as simply appending to the traditional sciences, but rather as transgressing them. In the following I will offer a critical reading of categories of academic discourses – i.e. of their premises. I hope that by denaturalizing these discourses I will contribute to altering their hetero/sexist dynamics.

From the perspective of *queer/feminist* theoretical developments, I will first address the question: What could “we” possibly “get out of” theater and performance theory? Second, I will give a brief summary of a *queer/feminist* critique on violence, which I will then bring together with certain aspects of a performance by Barbara Kraus<sup>2</sup>.

### THEATRICAL CATEGORIES IN CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER

I will begin with some thoughts on the categories of theatrical repertoire. Theater, performance theories, and practices as art forms have rarely been taken into account in recent European discourses on genders. Frequently researched topics include film, video, cyberart and club cultures. *Categories* of theater and performance such as staging, mimesis, masquerade, performativity have been circulating within gender and other post-structuralist theories since the 1980s. For at least twenty years, theatrical repertoire has supplied diverse gender theories with its concepts<sup>3</sup>. Taking a look at the history of theater studies (*Theaterwissenschaft*) as a discipline could help explain

- 1 I use “*queer/feminist*” to indicate the connections between the two while still separating both words in order to point to their differences.
- 2 This particular focus is related to the interest of the conference “Queering the humanities” (Berlin 2004), which sought to examine productive additions to and contentious fields of queer and feminist approaches. I have chosen to address some tensions between queer and feminist approaches in order to reveal the strengths of their connections.
- 3 Although performativity has become a familiar term, particularly through Judith Butler’s reading of John Austin’s linguistic philosophy, it is also a theatrical term.

why theater-related categories have provided quite illuminating insights when thinking about gender. In German-speaking countries, what started out as text-based studies within German literature departments, *Theaterwissenschaft* (literally: “theater science”) emerged as a discipline in the 1920s (Corssen y Kirsch, 1992). This new discipline recognized the power of signification of space, stage, acting, music and directing in its analyses and allowed for differentiations to be made in content and method. Theater and performance studies developed during the century well-known for having engendered practices that blurred clear-cut lines between art forms and those involved in it, i.e. between the “artists” and “audience” and for the institution of hybrid aesthetic movements, conventions and experiments<sup>4</sup>. Because of this, theater theory provides ways of speaking about realities that can no longer possibly be explained via (common philosophical/scientific practices of) ontology. The fleetingness of the “object of study” of theater studies is the specific characteristic that could explain the above-mentioned affinity of theatrical concepts and deconstructive discourses with one another, as the de-centralization of the play script left theater studies without an epistemic foundation. In theater studies research there is no genuinely comprehensible central element, in contrast to studies of art history and aesthetics which have images, scores and texts as “central elements” that can fall back on for their research. Susan Leigh Foster asserts that a consequence of and reason for this is a dialectics of theorizing bodies as the signifiers of the ephemeral and the momentary, thus covering up underlying “scripts” or “choreographies,” which leads to a lack of visibility of such theories<sup>5</sup>.

This may explain why theatrical concepts (mirror, mask/masquerade, stage/staging, mimesis, performativity) have been appropriated by post-structuralist “gender” theories. Theatrical concepts can be employed to describe unstable and variable relations as they refer to *aesthetic* – in terms of the original meaning of *aesthesis* as “sensuous perception or awareness” – processes of constructing meaning, which are not based on objectifiable conditions. In theater the construction of meaning takes place on the bodies physically present within a certain space. Sue-Ellen Case shows that analyses surrounding the concept of “perfor-

- 4 Roland Barthes’ proclamation of the “Death of the Author” (1974, p.29) can be read as symptomatic for this change in paradigm, which took place specifically in text-based arts where the main focus moved away from the (artistic) subject toward discourses.
- 5 Susan Leigh Foster discusses the problems linked to a perpetuation of the hierarchy between thought and deed that enables “performance” to emerge as an uncontested concept of theater studies, making a compelling argument for the use of the concept of “choreographies of gender”.

mativity” have receded from the foreground in favor of a “performativity of writing” that guarantees the physicality of the body, specifically for performance theorists. The concept of “performative writing” is established, according to Case, through the traditional dominance of writing over the body, of theory over art (1996, pp. 20-23)<sup>6</sup>. If performativity is deemed to have problematic effects in theater and performance theory, then, to a large extent, it remains unclear as to what art-specific implications “performance” holds in gender theories.

The indistinguishability of “art” from “reality,” implied by the “theater” concept, has all but disappeared in the concept of “performativity” and in performance art practices that, since the 1960s, have managed to cancel out any possible distinctions between everyday life and art, i.e. in relation to spaces, such as performance art in living rooms, store windows, etc. “Performance” indeed implies a specified double meaning, or more precisely, a simultaneity (of the performer and the “figure”). In contrast to theater, which is understood in its classic form as a representation, a “representation of” (a reality); “performance” suggests a transgression of the binary *per se*. In the following, I will sum up the implications of “performance” for understanding “gender”.

1. “Performance” places emphasis on gender as a perceptual process and on the incoherence within the individual subject (gender is not seen as ontologically self-evident, but as “something that is perceived”) (Irigaray, 1994; Butler, 2001; Felman, 1981 and Vinken, 1992). This is the point of intersection with notions of “*queer*”. “*Queer* [...] tears apart the seemingly obvious relationship between sex and gender, sexual desire and object choice, sexual practices and political identities, and renders subjectivities infinitely indeterminant”(Walters, 1996, p. 835).
2. Performance does not privilege linguistic significance, rather it focuses on the synchronicity of the *sign character and the materiality* of bodies visible. The title *In One Breath* alludes to this. In the performances *Zwischenräume* (*Spaces In Between*) and *Home Sweet Home*<sup>7</sup>, the breathing of the dancers/performers created a level of visual and acoustic signs, which are dis-

tinctly clear in these “dance theater” pieces that both have parts without music where the breathing took on the role of the music<sup>8</sup>. The synchronicity of the *sign character and materiality* of bodies – that has to be mentioned in one breath for them to flow into one another – is in line with a “*queer*” definition of sex/gender (Butler, 2001 and Polymorph, 2002).

3. An understanding of materiality and sign character that gives primacy to the *synchronicity of the material being and sign character of bodies* has the power to uproot unproductive dichotomies (especially “feminist” and “*queer*” theories) of the “constructed” body versus the “natural” body.

Following my reflections on theater theory, I will now expand upon the specific practices. One particular type of theater that has found its way into *queer* theory is Shakespearian theater. Similar to the way ancient Greek theater has been constructed as the “ideal” origin by early feminist research in theater studies (Pewny, 1993), Shakespearian theater seems to have initiated and pushed forward *queer* theater theory. Research on so-called boy actors who played women (characters) who played men (or male roles) has worked toward further staging and rendering ambiguous the correspondence between sex, outer appearance and desire (Stallybrass, 1991). The ambiguity of the actors’ gender literally “clung” to their bodies and the “layered” manner in which they wore gender(s) contributed substantially to the representational order of the theater. According to Marjorie Garber the invention of the stage curtain and its integration into the theatrical architecture moved the indistinguishability between real and non-real away from being based on bodies and moved it toward the difference between art and reality (Garber, 1990, 244f). Movements that muddled the distinction between (theater) art and reality, between theatrical and other types of spaces and between two (clearly separable) sexes were turned around in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most prominent examples of which can be found in performance art. The concept of the “veiled phallus” (Garber, 1990, 244f)<sup>9</sup> returns here and is re-enacted as difference *within* the individual subject. The theater’s “curtain” has been (at least for the most part) physically done away with, and now is enacted within the characters on stage/performers themselves as well as in the gaze of the audience (Brandstetter, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> See also Schlichter, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> “Veiled phallus” (Garber, 1990) points at the phantasmatic character of phallic power, which is shifting and can never be finally tracked down. It is, at the same time, present and absent. This doubleness describes exactly what Barbara Kraus does in her performative appearance as *Johnny*.

## DIFFERENTIAL POLITICS OF CATEGORIZATION

Theatrical concepts such as “masquerade”, “staging” and “role” employed in thinking about gender uncover the inconsistencies and ambiguities of sexuality<sup>10</sup>. They highlight gaps between a (seemingly consistent) self and its representations. But the different theatrical concepts bear implicit constructions of subjectivity and thus, of gender. For example, a term like “role” that stems from classic dramatic theater implies a self that can take on a role and afterwards return to its former self. So, in this context the following questions come up: What happens when we try to unambiguously name gender relations? What (terminological) limits are we confronted with when naming the varying categories of gender? The following section was developed based on my interest in a critique of concepts treated as self-evident and in *queer/feminist* thought. Here I step into contentious fields of inquiry and am concerned with fruitful contributions made by feminists and *queer* theorists to a critique of sexualized violence. The above named questions are among the most crucial topics, and, therefore, some of the most promising points of encounter between feminist and *queer* analyses and understanding.

In giving a brief overview of this discussion, I will incorporate both writings and debates from political movements. In the 1970s, feminist critiques erupted – also as part of the (personal experience of) making the private political – and they strongly focused on relations of dominance and on a critique of (sexualized) violence by men on women and girls. “Men” and “women” – the conceptual framework of gender duality – functioned as necessary categories in order to be able to describe the immense number of perpetrators and the women and girls affected. There are many different terms that name many different realities: in order to expand the meaning of the word “rape,” women began to speak of “sexual violence” against women/girls. “Sexual violence of men” made an explicit reference to the sex of the violator. The use of the terms “sexual violence of men” against “women, lesbians and girls” was an attempt to differentiate the positions of those involved and to clearly specify different forms of violence (misogynist, lesbophobic violence). “Naming ‘sexualized violence’ also strengthens the exertion of power by means of violence that is exercised sexually” (Unterweger, 2001). Hence, “sexualized” violence stresses that a physical attack does not constitute the beginning of violence; rather it is embedded within numerous other societal norms.

<sup>10</sup> This is particularly obvious in the case of “performativity.” For more on the various implications of different terms see Pewny, 2004.

Feminist critiques of violence have sounded out a spectrum ranging from women as victims/survivors to women as perpetrators – with all of its nuances in between (such as considering the possibility that a woman could simultaneously be both a perpetrator and a victim) – that are still valid today. In German-speaking countries, the “complicity” debate (which focused on the complicity of women in National Socialism) initiated by Christina Thürmer-Rohr put a spotlight on women as perpetrators, both within heterosexual and lesbian contexts (Ebner, Coltre and Newald, 2001, p.14)<sup>11</sup>. From the mid-1990s, further work has focused on women/lesbians as aggressive and (potentially) violent subjects, also uncovering how the mainstream has marketed “lesbians” as “violent”<sup>12</sup>.

In recent years, the discourses listed below have been developed and added to the initial feminist analyses of sexualized violence:

1. Distortion through media and conservative portrayals that was aptly dubbed the “abuse of the abuse debate” (Heynen, 2000, p. 306).
2. Psychology/trauma theory that interweaves sociopolitical analyses with internal psychological processes (of the victims), and others that limit themselves to “therapeutic” discourses in the stricter sense (Herman, 2003; Heynen, 2000; Rothschild, 2000).
3. National and supranational juridical discourses, symposia and debates (on “women’s shelters” and other institutions, including the debate on rape as a war crime or as grounds for asylum, etc.).

In German-speaking countries, (academic) publications of violence critiques from the perspectives of anti-racist, *queer* and dis/ability studies have increased in circulation in the past years (for example Ohms, 2000; Castro Varela, 2003; Steyerl and Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2003). Although these analyses intricately work through the interplay of different forms of violence and see these not simply as “supplemental,” but as having emerged “intertwined” with one another (for example Haritaworn, 2003), these works

<sup>11</sup> Here I am referring to the debates – which were disproportionately larger in Germany than in Austria – that dealt with women as perpetrators in National Socialism, yet they were almost fully disengaged from debates on sexual violence. Exceptions from this dissociation are Dan Bar-On in Weigel, and a recent publication on sexual violence in concentration camps by Amesberger, Auer and Halbmayr (2003).

<sup>12</sup> See the above-mentioned publications by Hacker, 1998; Hart, 1994; Ebner, Coltre and Newald, 2001.

often remain separate from the past history of feminist debates on sexualized violence<sup>13</sup>. One difficulty in bringing together these violence critiques could be posed by their differing politics concerning the use of categories. While “*queer* positions” (despite this problematic generalization) aim to dissolve the principle of gender dualism, “feminist” positions rely on designating (two) sexes, as in the model of the perpetrator and victim. The main discrepancy between feminist and *queer* critiques of violence is not to be found in putting women exclusively in the position of the victim, but rather it lies in the gender dualism posited by feminists who maintain that the sex of the majority of the perpetrators is male and that of the victims is female. “The insistence on ‘*queer*’ – a term defined against ‘normal’ and generated precisely in the context of terror – has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence” (Michael Warner quoted in Walters, 1996, p. 834).

I find that the connection between a critique of sexualized violence based on gender dualism and the critique of instating a dualistic distinction of gender as a form of violence<sup>14</sup> is a very productive point of departure, and I would therefore like to begin with a definition of violence that encompasses both critiques. Carol Hagemann-White states that

violence within gender relations is when a person’s physical or emotional integrity is violated, in a way that has to do with the sexuality of the victim and the perpetrator, and has been brought forth by the structurally ‘stronger’ person taking advantage of their position in the power structure (Dackweiler in Koher and Pühl, 2003, p. 47).

In order to be able to name this power structure, it is necessary to have categories that – following the line of argument of critiques on sexualized violence – relate to gender (relations). Sexualized violence is – in line with a structural strengthening of (a male) position – to be viewed as a political institution that produces the hierarchical orders of compulsory heterosexuality that embodies a male part, defined by its power over the female, and a female part constituted by subjugation (against one’s own will). The analysis of establishing hetero/sexist norms through the assertion of (e.g. via sexualized) violence could be a common field of interest for *queer*/feminist thought. I would like to

13 Ebner, Coltre and Newald, (2001) and Tost, (1999) are exceptions in the German-speaking discourse.

14 These different focal points are not directly correlated with the changes in the political movements. (See above)

demonstrate this point by means of an analysis of the film *Dandy Dust*<sup>15</sup> by Doro Wiese:

Compulsory embodiment of a differentiated self that invents itself from within categories that bring about identity, such as family background, historical memory, unambiguous gender and heterosexual desire, are staged here [...]. In *Dandy Dust* the self is staged as inconsistent and a means to transport these outgrowths that are bodies embedded in a fragmented narrative structure and that function as nodes within the collective family experiment and the constitution of the subjects that are violently brought about, and which – despite the will to be a family – escape being rendered unambiguous.

Furthermore, “If Dandy had always been a son to Sir Sidore, with whom he homosocially engaged, for example when he took him\* hunting, he made him a girl/woman through rape. [...] Rape rendered Sir Sidore heterosexual” (Wiese in Koher and Pühl, 2003, p.119-128, my translation)<sup>16</sup>.

Here, *Dandy Dust* is *raped into becoming a girl/woman* (Heinrichs, 175f)<sup>17</sup>. In Wiese’s argument, it is not clear why rape makes a multiple gendered person a woman. In continuing with the genealogy of feminist critiques of violence I would like to point to the significance of linking “being raped” to “becoming a woman/girl,” and “man” (men) to perpetrator(s). Therefore, we could add that “Sir Sidore rendered himself [not only, K.P.] a heterosexual *man* through rape” (Wiese in Koher and Pühl, 2003, p. 128, my emphasis).

From a *queer*/feminist view we can point out the following aspects of sexualized violence as hetero/sexist conditioning:

1. Feminization as/through the object status, masculinization through the perpetrator status;

15 Film critic Stefan Grisseemann describes *Dandy Dust* (1998) as follows: “A cyborg with a split personality and fluid gender zooms through time to collect his/her “selves” in a struggle against a family obsessed by lineage: This cartoon-like futuristic low-budget horror satire by the Austro-British filmmaker Hans Scheirl turns the real into the absurd, for the duration of a small cybernetic, chemo-sexual film adventure at least. Identity is just a matter of creativity, and far beyond cinema’s limitations.” Downloaded September 20th, 2007 from [http://verleih.polyfilm.at/sommer99/hans\\_scheirldandy\\_dust.htm](http://verleih.polyfilm.at/sommer99/hans_scheirldandy_dust.htm).

16 In this section Wiese stresses that the perpetrator is repulsed by homosexual desire, which drives him to “make himself heterosexual.” The category of “man” does not surface in the discussion of this particular scene. The sign *him\** is used here to indicate undefined gender status.

17 Gesa Heinrichs, in her analysis of a film version of Brandon Teena’s life, uses a similar way of naming her this.

2. Sexualized violence as heterosexualization, and as
3. a mechanism that renders gender unambiguous.

In differentiating these approaches in order to offer a critique of violence, I aim to demonstrate that sexualized violence is a product of hierarchically structured compulsory heterosexuality that “calls for” sexual dualism: for a masculinity that has power over femininity and for a femininity defined along the lines of involuntary sexual(ized) subjugation.

### TOUCHING

Accounts of sexualized violence are “touchy” to deal with, because they underscore both the materiality of bodies *and* their sign character that is linked to ways of thinking about performance. Hence, rape or beating are assaults on the body that touch, hurt and make incisions on the body on both material and symbolical levels. This dual effect has been taken on as a theme by numerous authors, performers, and theater-makers (Pewny, 2002). In this third and final section I will bring performance theory and violence critique together by examining the performance *Wer will, kann kommen* (*Who wants to, can come*, my translation, Vienna, 1999) by Barbara Kraus through the lens of Ann Cvetkovich’s reading of *queer/feminist* performances as expressions of culture that also have the potential to “preserve” traumas. Cvetkovich understands lesbian cultures (songs, films, everyday events, photographs, artwork etc.) as “archives,” e.g. of traumatic memory (Cvetkovich, 2003). In contrast to discourses that are generally based on the psyche, Cvetkovich’s approach concentrates on visible and perceptible expressions of culture that often employ different practices to bring out into the open that which is unspeakable and repressed. She works with the collective dimension, into which she “integrates” sexualized violence. She writes: “trauma cultures are actually doing the work of therapy” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 10), which she does not mean as a reference to processes of individualized therapy but rather public and cultural manifestations, such as concerts and workshops during the Michigan Women’s Music Festival.

Performances are public, cultural manifestations. The performance *Wer will kann kommen* portrays a single figure (Barbara Kraus) as she transforms into diverse characters of different genders without employing a “stage curtain,” thus rendering her transitions transparent and making her body the site where the ambiguity of gender

is performed<sup>18</sup>. This indifference toward difference (man/woman) corresponds with the lack of spatial signifiers in the performance space (clearly delineating the audience or stage) and with the missing stage curtain<sup>19</sup>. One “scene” that stands out because of its unconventional spatial and aesthetic setup is when a tape recording of the performer’s voice (in the character of Johnny) is heard narrating a text about sexual acts and acts of sexualized violence. Beforehand, the performer distributed eye masks or suggested that the “spectators” close their eyes for this part. The performer moved throughout the room lightly touching the “audience” on their shoulders, necks etc. and handing out eggs and strawberries to everyone<sup>20</sup>.

This “scene” shows a particular point where several aspects I have mentioned above intersect, i.e. it provides a site for them to un-ravel. In this way, this scene could be seen as a “binding element” for *queer* and feminist critiques of violence. Some such conjunctures made possible here are:

1. From a position identifiable as that of a man, Johnny tells about his acts (or fantasies) of violence. His relating of this story could be interpreted as the presentation and critique of a “negative” reality, or it could also be read as (uncritically) repeating this kind of a reality.
2. A male (possibly perpetrator-) identified woman tells the same story of her experiences or fantasies. This could be read as alluding to the psychological concept of identifying with the enemy/perpetrator and as the story being a product of female fantasy.
3. A person with a male-connoted name and a female-connoted voice speaks of her/his own acts, fantasies or experiences.
4. The disassociation of “voice” from “body” in theatrical representation makes reference to the fragmentation that can come about due to sexualized violence and

18 Austrian performer Barbara Kraus is by now well known in the middle European performance -and dance scene. *Wer will, kann kommen* and its thrilling character Johnny, a white, low class-drag figure, travelled to numerous dance and performance festivals over the last decade.

19 For this reason, it came as no surprise that during the public discussion that followed the performance the most frequently asked question was about the “true” identity of the performer. Obviously, for an average festival audience, the fluid changes of “Barbaras” to “Johnnys” sex/gender provoked a requirement of a stable gender identity.

20 Small details of the performance changed with the years. Sometimes the performers are handing out plums and grapes.

the incoherence between the subject, the body, desire and sexuality.

The instability of the speaker's position increases when the performer constantly changes her location (the voice on tape is easily identifiable as that of the performer) and when the audience is denied all visual images (they are void of any visual reassurance because they have their eyes shut or blindfolded); which clearly points to the interpretative authority of one's own perception and to the dominance of one's own (and society's) conceptualizations about gender. Hence, (this) contemporary performance shifts differentiations, e.g. between visible/invisible, theater/reality and stage/audience to become situated in the gaze (the eyelid as a curtain), thus shifting them into the realm of the imaginary, behind the spectators' eyelids. Here, the impressions one gets from the performance are no longer conveyed through the visual images, but rather through the physical presence of the body, through touching and through the body's memory of sensual perception and the feelings experienced. In this way, the performance evokes the materiality of the body and of violence and destabilizes seemingly fixed positions (through performing fragmentations).

In one breath, two (hetero/sexist) gender constructions of the violent male and suffering female are installed and are simultaneously constituted, evoked and irritated. In politically engaged theater, "evocation" is a contentious element, because it is disputable whether evocation is an affirmative or rather a subversive gesture. In addressing this question, I will answer and conclude in one breath, using Ann Cvetkovich's words: "The subversive possibilities of repetition with a difference, which have been valorized in discussions on butch-femme, drag and other *queer* cultural practices, therefore provide the basis for healing rituals and performances [...]"(Cvetkovich, 2003).

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