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Response to Kutzinski

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Response

Anne Gomez Huff

In her highly-focused and thorough essay, Dr. Kutzinski explores how the work of Caribbean novelists has been alienated from critical and commercial spheres because they are texts that resist what Kutzinski calls a “heteronormative” reading. Kutzinski discusses Shani Mootoo’s 1996 novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, as a work that opposes this heteronormativity, which Kutzinski describes as a major fault line in a post-colonial feminist geography, connecting the theoretical neglect of queerness and sexual difference as a strategic gesture in formulating a consumable, packageable portrait of Caribbean literature. Engaging with textual and complex theoretical systems, Kutzinski deftly examines how “systematically imposed expectations of authenticity function as vehicles for ideological censorship and appropriation by depriving the artistic statements of women (and other ‘victims’) of their intellectual and imaginative dimensions.” In the context of this year’s Roundtable, Kutzinski’s work clearly asks the question that underpins this weekend’s ongoing dialogue: What can or will feminism look like in a burgeoning theoretically post-essentialist landscape?

Kutzinski’s engagement of Shani Mootoo is altogether persuasive, but more importantly, a natural gesture towards a larger dialogue that I will expand upon in two ways: first, in a discussion of the problematics of spatial allocation to counter-discursive disciplines; second, in a commentary about the implications of feminist performativity and the impact of this performance on these spaces. I’d like to frame my response to Kutzinski around the work of Judith Butler and her notion of performance and performativity.

Butler is seen as one of the foremost scholars of gender discourse and queer theory. Her works—most notably *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limitations of “Sex”* (1993)—provide pivotal moments in a feminist genealogy. Butler, who contests the very category of “woman,” says that we must view “woman” as multiple and discontinuous, and reject a static category that lacks what she calls an “ontological integrity.”¹ Feminism is fundamentally essentialist because it imagines “woman” as “groupable” under the assumptions of a “natural” gender. Though from the outset, rejecting biology as destiny, Butler understands feminism as a discursive construct built

in opposition to a universal patriarchal culture that depends on a male/female binary. In this light, feminism has constructed itself in a counter-discursive space.

For the purposes of my response, I call *counter-discursal* those marginalized disciplines that base their study and areas of concentration on the histories, aesthetics, and traditions of unrepresented, minority populations. These are disciplines — which range from women's to ethnic studies — that have demanded a location in the mapped genealogy of white Western academia and are placed in an accessory position because their presence assumes and supposedly addresses a lack in an established Western, masculinist, and anglocentric body of curriculum. From the existence and proliferation of these counter-discursal disciplines emerge important questions about the canon and the production of knowledge.

It is necessary to remain skeptical of the spaces allocated to these and all disciplines — not because the disciplines themselves do not merit being part of mainstream academia, for indeed they are crucial to a liberal arts education — but because it is necessary to avoid making the spaces they occupy into tokenized, “authentic” locations easily commodified by both glossy college catalogues and expansionist publishing houses. The textual expressions of those who inhabit counter-discursive spaces are especially vulnerable to a certain commodification that, in a best case scenario, means having only an “Oprah’s Book Club” emblem bruise the cover of your novel, solidifying Oprah’s promise for an easily digestible, sufficiently exotic, yet ultimately predictable read. How can these spaces avoid becoming a stage upon which easily managed tropes become the sole performers? How can they remain vibrant and regenerate? How can they avoid becoming locations of what Stanley Fish calls “boutique multiculturalism,”² where what is multicultural is affectionately tolerated until it infringes upon the identity and values of those who tolerate it?

The future of these spaces is invariably linked to Butler’s notion of performance and its subversive possibilities. Who dictates how identity-based disciplines are performed, and who is allowed to perform them? According to Butler, “naturalized” identity is reinforced through repetition of performance. In her discussion of gender, she comments that “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of

gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results."³ In other words, we are the role that we perform, but the role we play is not dependent on who we are.

For Butler, performance holds a potentially subversive quality when it resists unidimensional performances of identity that are static and essentialist; or in other words, when one rejects understanding oneself through monolithic categories like "woman." This subversive performance potentially becomes an indecipherable menace when it denies exclusive relegation to one space, when it insists upon engaging with and creating alliances with subversive identities and discourses — in other words, when it becomes queer. Queerness as a subversive performance is ultimately illustrated by Butler's metaphor of drag, which:

mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity. . . . The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed."⁴

Queerness reveals the arbitrariness of gendered distinctions by parodying them to the point where they become ineffective and farcical.⁵ For being in drag means being able to manipulate a variety of gendered codes while simultaneously destabilizing all of them and not being constrained by any singular, essentialized gender. Manipulating these codes means erasing the power relation and binary understanding between those who impose the rules of authenticity and those who actually perform it. In terms of the counter-discursive spaces that I have already mentioned, what impact would a Butlerian unmaking of identity and erasure of authority have on these and other disciplinary and political spaces, and at whose cost?

Now I will return to Kutzinski and the critique that she poses of post-colonial feminist discourse, which I will link to the precarious promise of counter-discursive spaces. Kutzinski suggests that a postcolonial feminism (though I would add, *all* feminisms) should reject insularity and "de-regulate fictions of identity rather than locate its *raison d'être* in establishing normative ideals, for instance, by redrawing old lines of divisions between all sorts of bodies, textual and otherwise." I contend

that postcolonial feminism destabilizes what are seen as foundations of postcolonial thought. It pushes up against and extends well beyond prescriptivist Fanonian, Cesairian, and even V.S. Naipaulian “master-narratives” of postcoloniality to offer new postcolonialities that unmake identity, and has been traditionally invested in challenging the masculinist vision and revision of the postcolonial nation. What would it mean to expand the agenda and the critical repertoire of the postcolonial feminist?

The fear of unmaking a feminist identity—that is, extending performances of feminism to include alternate, non-gender-specific performances of identity (in this case, queerness)—is undercut by an anxiety that reconstructing feminism and redefining the parameters of feminist discourse might jeopardize the already established space that feminist thought and theory occupies within academia. Yet when it becomes informed and shaped by other counter-discourses, does Kutzinski’s deregulation of fictions of identity quietly lean toward the end of feminism?

To paraphrase Butler, the potentially subversive performance of counter-discursive disciplines depends on causing not “gender trouble,” but “discourse trouble.” Causing discourse trouble would include disabling authenticity as an anchor and shackle of counter-discourse, and causing such trouble would demand a reconsideration of both the shape and spaces inhabited by a feminist discourse. In “Maps, Knowledge, and Power,” Brian Harley suggests that “Maps are preeminently a language of power, not of protest.”⁶ I contend that discourse trouble would deterritorialize mapped identity and articulate not only a critical disinterest in gendered geographies, but a realization that maps are no longer useful and that identity extends beyond the “gazeable” and navigable. For only by disempowering a politics of space allocation can one successfully subvert ghettoization and landscapes that essentialize and undermine the very premise of counter-discursiveness.

Engendering discourse trouble will also, perhaps, coax feminism into its “fourth wave,” which will hopefully be one that intentionally merges with alternative theoretical currents. Feminism must assume new degrees of indeterminacy and unexpected identifications and alliances if it is to survive a partitioned and exclusionary genealogy written down solely in DNA and X chromosomes. This means learning to be flexible inside and outside of marginalized spaces, learning to move from a politics of authenticity to a textual and contextual dexter-

ity that constantly reinvents itself and *allows itself* to be reinvented through engaging and interacting with other disciplines.

To contextualize my comments, I will examine the body of this year's International Roundtable, which has engaged itself with the question of international feminisms, and which, incidentally, includes only two men (one who chaired Professor Barlas's panel, and one who responded to Professor Rowbotham's paper). Though I, for one, was elated at the idea of a Roundtable specifically designed to be a public engagement on gender and feminism, I was admittedly disappointed by the absence of a larger number of male panelists. What is the performative function of a panel on international feminisms composed of thirteen women and only two men? If the premise of feminist critiques of culture is to destabilize and "de-center" the assumptions inscribed on women's lives and work, why is it that only women place themselves and are systematically placed in positions that render them accountable for dispersing the gaze? The glaring paucity of male voices makes this forum not bankrupt, but compromised, because it points out, once again, exactly who is held accountable for representing and transforming feminism.

In Butlerian terms, the majority of this year's Roundtable discussants have been chosen because of a specific, gendered authenticity they are being expected to now perform. While the fact of gender could perhaps be seen as a novelty to *this* forum, it is extremely problematic that a Roundtable that wishes to diffuse the notion of feminism into scattered but interrelated *feminisms* has generally constructed itself in such a way that reinforces a gendered essentialism.

Notes

1. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990.
2. Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking About Free Speech," *Critical Inquiry*.
3. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
5. Hedges, "Howells's 'Wretched Fetishes' Character, Realism and Other Modern Instances," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*.
6. Brian Harley, "Maps, Knowledge, and Power."