



*Performing
Identity and Gender in
Literature, Theatre and
the Visual Arts*

Edited by Panayiota Chrysochou

This volume presents a compelling mélange of chapters focusing on the myriad ways in which performance and gender are inextricably bound to identity. It shows how gender, performance and identity play themselves out in various ways, contexts and genres, in order to illumine the very instability and fluidity of identity as a static category. As such, it is a must-read for anyone interested in gender studies, identity politics and literature in general.

Panayiota Chrysochou studied English Literature at the University of Cyprus, before going on to complete her Masters degree at Warwick University, UK. She received a PhD in Psychoanalysis and Theatre from the University of Edinburgh, UK, and conducted her postdoctoral research on Gender Studies at the University of Cyprus. Her research interests include psychoanalysis and trauma studies, performance theory, postcolonial theory, semiotics, the Victorian Gothic, and the Gothic generally as a mode and aesthetic, as well as texts ranging from the nineteenth to twenty-first century. She has published in journals such as *American Imago*, *Semiotica*, *The Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* and *The Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*. Her current research re-examines the effects of technology and vision on the theatrical body through a psychoanalytic framework and how trauma functions as an inscribed narrative on bodies and identity.



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ABSTRACTS

Chapter One

The body – whether it is seen as being a material, substantive entity or dematerialised, semiotic sign, or even a technological abstraction – is always caught up in a discourse at the intersection of art, technology and body politics, where social and political structures are often (re)enacted and (re)produced through individual acts and practices. The machinic body, gendered body, historicised body, performing body, fragmented body, objectified body, phenomenological body and the body in pain all point to the ineluctable, historical discursivity surrounding the body, from a Western metaphysics of presence to a de-subjectified semiotics to a postmodernist revision of notions of embodiment, where the body (as well as identity) is relegated to fictive, dialogical or constantly emerging and shifting positions. This chapter aims to show how the artistic practices of the bodily-based performance artist Franko B, who theatrically has his body cut and refashioned in front of a large audience through the use of machinic and technological devices, attempt to stretch the body's boundaries and to collapse the material body into the abstract body-machine-image complex by merging life and machinic processes. It also points to the very real limits and challenges of using the body as a hermeneutical system, a political tool, and as a vessel for defining identity.

Chapter Two

The central role of gender in shaping the identity of women in the United States during and after World War II is reflected in literature in the novels of Carson McCullers. In exposing the fallacy of the prescribed gender binary, the writer resorts to the figures of the Freak and the Androgyne as liberating female alternatives to the constricting norms of Southern patriarchy. Throughout "The Ballad of the Sad Café," "The Member of the Wedding" and "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter," the role of femininity as traditionally understood in the South, under the guise of the Southern belle, is deliberately deconstructed, genders are intertwined and scrambled, and the resulting dysfunctional relationships fail as a sign of society's rejection of shifts in gender politics. Thus, McCullers' most

'feminine' characters are tellingly either not female or too young to pick a gender, temporarily inhabiting the gender of their choice as an experiment in establishing an identity. The results are grotesque: Cousin Lymon, an unattractive hunchback, adopts the attention-seeking, narcissistic, 'feminine' behaviour of the belle, just as Baby, Biff Brannon's five year-old niece, prances around town with salon-curled hair – a grotesque miniature of an adult woman. Teenage girls, especially, are confronted with the dilemma of deciding which gender to choose. An artificial construct ratified by society, femininity is a path not easily taken by the tomboyish Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams, who are aware that their options are either limited to renouncing their real nature and becoming respectable young ladies, or embracing their lack of femininity and being labelled as 'Freaks' (like the androgynous Miss Amelia Evans). Relying on Judith Butler's theory of femininity as performance, this chapter is concerned with highlighting the disparity between gender and sex, femininity and femaleness, in the Southern author's fiction.

Chapter Three

Hanif Kureishi's work focuses on the shifting and polyvalent manifestations of desire and sexuality within the social and cultural realms in Britain, opening up spaces in the cultural landscape to include – intentionally – the marginalised and politically disenfranchised, while interrogating at the same time hegemonic discourses pertaining to the formation of identities. Such an approach gestures towards a re-evaluation of desire which, in turn, can lead us to re-think identity as a constantly evolving, uncategorised and therefore politically powerful apparatus. After the publication of his memoir, *My Ear at His Heart* (2004), in which the reader is given insights as to how and why characters in the author's work were created, it seems that affective terms such as desire and sexuality can indeed be used to re-imagine the ways in which identity is experienced. Such an approach alludes to the complex constitutions of identity/ies apropos aesthetic or political concerns, and to how they can engage in a difficult and complex, yet fruitful relationship, avoiding what can be considered by the mainstream as 'socio-political abnormalities.' In that, I put forward that a retrospective re-examination of Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) is imperative, as it can help us understand how an evolutionary model of writing nods towards a sense of identity whose articulation has become distinctly polycultural, even post-racial. Such a revisiting of known texts can offer new insights on debates about identity and nation that transcend solipsistic and exclusivist diasporic

matters about 'myself' as they gesture towards the aesthetic. Indeed, my chapter invites the reader to conceive contemporary identity in affective terms and consequently as a space that surpasses the solipsism of cultural diversity, racial difference or narrow national exclusivity, thus inviting us to experience identity as a cultural instigator carrying socio-political possibilities.

Chapter Four

Identity, as being 'individual, ethnic, national,' is problematized by the multiplicity and instability that is potentiated in transnational movements and relocations. The breaking apart of identity is, furthermore, accelerated by exile which Edward Said declares as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted' (*Reflections of Exile*, 173).¹ A questioning of identity is symptomatic of the exile who attempts to reconcile the loss of nationality by writing the hyphenated identity into being. The social ecology of displacement necessitates a reconstitution of identity as former identity constructions endure disruptions that defer, or negate, the continuation of its performances. By remaining in ontological transit, the exile experiences a dislocation that is at once physical and metaphysical; it is, Dubravka Ugresic testifies, 'the restless process of testing values and comparing worlds: the one we left and the one where we ended up' (*Thank you for not reading*, 128).² In this chapter, I argue that the negotiation between worlds is realized in exilic literatures which moderate the ways in which language, despite the multiplicities of meaning it engenders, may be used as a self-reflexive testament of exile. My analysis will focus on David Albahari's "Bait," Dzevad Karahasan's "Sarajevo, Exodus of a City," and Dubravka Ugresic's "The Ministry of Pain." All expatriates of former Yugoslavia, these authors' texts represent the transitioning between identities and the trauma that provokes it. I will examine how each text employs a language of reification whereby the experiences of identity and displacement are portrayed through the instability of dislocated languages and subjectivities as a means to authenticate these experiences in the written artifact. These literary curations reify the authors' trauma of dislocation, thus establishing an episteme of the 'essential sadness' of exile.

Chapter Five

Performance art positions itself as potentially contestable, democratic and open to and curious about disagreement. Its ephemeral and often erratic character seems to be exemplary for any description or scrutiny of the dynamics of contact. Most of these contacts of the performer's body, identity and intention with an audience in a specific space and time have occurred within the ambit of a genuinely art-friendly community – galleries, museums or city centres. Here, artists have challenged boundaries of perception and taste, control and behaviour. The audience's reaction has thus been able to be read as an indicator for societal orientations – most impressively conducted in Marina Abramović's latest work "The artist is present" in 2010 and the accompanying photographs of Marco Anelli which evoke a society of highly individualized faces and emotions. Yet, rarely has performance art been so consequently conveyed to different audiences and localities as in the work of South African artist Steven Cohen. In Steven Cohen's work the rather positive connotation and dialogical structure of contact is saturated with ingredients of confrontation when he transfers 'Eurocentric drag' to the African province or 'Patriotic drag' as the Jewish princess Menorah to a white right-wing rally in Pretoria.

Apart from the contact that happens on his very body – when Cohen applies to it objects of various provenance and not only undermines with them hegemonic images of masculinity but also bristles against conventional modes of travesty – he exposes his bodily image to its seemingly antithetic reality. The responses to Cohen's performances extend from the objectification of his body through ambivalent desire, hate and disgust to the body's glorification through amazement and joy. In my chapter I would like to investigate first the audience's reactions to his projects "Chandelier" (2001-2002) and "Limping into the African Renaissance" (1999-2000) both in Africa and Europe and with it the translocal dynamics that contact entails. I would like to ask if different reactions occur when Cohen, dressed as a chandelier, enters an informal settlement in Johannesburg or stages the same performance at a festival in Annecy and how these reactions not only reflect unexpected statements on an audience's affective potential but also the oscillation of Cohen's body when being exposed as 'spectacularly white' or the 'proximate other' in respective localities. I secondly would like to ask about the relationship between authenticity and theatricality of performance art which in Cohen's work seems to merge when he, on the one hand, declares that he disguises himself 'in order to be able to express' himself and, on the other hand, was

criticized by the gay community for ‘presenting his queer self in such a monstrous fashion.’ I would like to argue that the expression of such a monstrous fashion can be perceived as both authentic and theatrical at the same time.

Chapter Six

The plays of British dramatist Sarah Kane (1971-1999) confront the problem of subject identity in a postmodern fragmented world in a radical and unsettling way. Within a reality that widely negates the traditional ways of experiencing identity (as well as its representation) in relationship, narration, or in notions such as character and continuity, her *dramatis personae* are endangered by a dispersal of self. Seemingly recurring to a Cartesian idea of a strict dichotomy between body and mind, Kane shows her characters as driven by a strong desire to overcome the same. This aim, however, proves to be obtainable only in rare moments of suffering and in drastic ‘re-enactments’ at the threshold between life and death. Applying Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as well as Victor Turner’s concept of liminality in ritual performance, this chapter sets out to explore Kane’s concept of identity, especially focusing on her second play, *Phaedra’s Love*. Analysing the protagonist Hippolytus’ radical and repulsive crave for authenticity within a consumerist society of spectacle it discusses the importance of the abject as a realm of self-encounter with the experience of disgust and nausea as a means of self-perception. Furthermore, the chapter argues that although in the corrupt society depicted in Kane’s play the idea of ritual has become distorted and dysfunctional, in voluntarily adopting the role of a perpetrator her protagonist (becoming the victim in a cruel performance) experiences identity, albeit in the moment of utmost torture and, ultimately, death. On a larger plane, Kane’s plays open up possibilities to theatrically overcome the fragmentation of the subject in the acceptance of its abject condition as ‘mortal and speaking’ and for audiences to perceive identity through the means of performance on stage.

Notes

¹ Edward Said. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.

² *Thank You For Not Reading: Essays on Literary Trivia*. Translated by Celia Hawkesworth and Damion Searles. London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003.

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