Bodies, Deviancy, and Socio-Political Change:

Judith Butler on Intelligibility

By

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Submitted to the Graduate Program in Philosophy

in conformity with the requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

October, 2012

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Abstract

In this thesis I contribute to arguments showing how the human body is much more than a vessel that enables us to experience the world through our senses. Our sense of embodiment and our embodied performances give meaning to and shape the world in which we live. I argue that our bodies are crucial to socio-political change and subverting discriminatory cultural assumptions and ideologies.

Deviant performances can cause us to be less than intelligible individuals. That is, according to Judith Butler, we become less than intelligible when we do not perform in such a way that meets certain cultural expectations. Dominant expectations are typically implicitly understood to be common-sense values. Unfortunately, many of our implicit values have embedded unjust prejudices that directly affect our thinking and behaviour. These discriminatory implicit values are couched in “the background.” Alexis Shotwell’s expansion of what John R. Searle terms “the background” is particularly useful to understand the political nature of implicitly held beliefs. These discriminatory assumptions couched in the background systematically oppress us. However, the prejudices of the background can be exposed through repeatedly performing our bodies in certain ways. Additionally, our performances can enable us to pool our intellectual resources together and live out the socio-political change we desire. In doing so, performances and identities that were once considered unintelligible can become intelligible and can alter cultural climates.
Acknowledgements

The writing of this thesis has proved to be the most meaningful academic challenge I have faced thus far. Without the support of Dr. Susan E. Babbitt and Dr. Jacqueline M. Davies, my supervisors, this thesis would not have been completed. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Babbitt and Dr. Davies for their encouragement, constructive suggestions, and patient guidance. Their willingness to generously give so much of their time to my research has been much appreciated.

I would also like to extend my thanks, more generally, to the staff, faculty, and graduate students of Queen’s Philosophy Department for helping me navigate my way through the Master of Arts program.

Lastly, I wish to thank Dana Cassady and my family for their unshakable support and encouragement throughout my study.
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Chapter 1: General Introduction

Philosophers such as Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Chuang Tzu, the Buddha, José Martí, Paulo Freire, Michel Foucault, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Friedrich Nietzsche, and many feminists have argued that the body is a principal element of human understanding and that it is not separate from the mind. Take, for instance, Nietzsche’s insight:

‘Body am I, and soul’ – thus speaks the child. And why should one not speak like children? But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body. The body is a great reason, a plurality with one sense […]. There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom (30).

Some notable feminists argue that embodied experience relates to dominant cultural ideologies and assumptions. Take, for instance, Iris Young’s text, On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays, and Susan Bordo’s Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body. Such examples notwithstanding, the body is typically neglected or discussed as if it is a separate entity from the mind; for the most part, philosophers within European/North American traditions fail to acknowledge how central the body is to understanding what it is to be human, how we experience the world, and how we situate ourselves in the world. Our embodiment must be properly credited as crucial to how we create, as well as understand the world, others, and ourselves. I find Judith Butler’s concepts of intelligibility and performativity to be especially helpful for understanding why and how embodiment is so significant.

Our bodies are inextricably linked to our perceived, prescribed, projected, and performed identities. Understanding how our bodies maneuver themselves to interact with our surroundings and other individuals, we can come to understand that our bodies are located at the nexus of our
current socio-political circumstances and, as such, are a site of potential socio-political change. Occasionally, the seeds of socio-political transformation are planted when our bodies perform deviant, at first unintelligible, identities often enough until ideological frameworks deform and reform to accommodate them. That is, as a way to claim, standardize, and institutionalize an identity, one consistently performs in such a way that does not conform to dominant cultural expectations and normative values. Over time the deviant can become more intelligible and generate new norms.

As I recognize below, not all deviants are socially progressive or radical. Some deviant behaviour is pointlessly inconsistent with dominant norms; some is politically regressive; and some is anti-social behaviour. The kind of deviancy that interests me is neither oppressively regressive (e.g. sporting a swastika tattoo) nor pointlessly anti-social (e.g. littering). The deviance that interests me makes a risky identity claim and is purposefully and consistently performed. That is, the deviant repeatedly performs the unexpected in an attempt to escape, bypass, or depart from dominant norms and expectations in a specific non-regressive or pointlessly anti-social manner. Repeated performances tend to delegitimize and destabilize prevailing cultural assumptions about what is considered to be an acceptable identity to adopt and perform.

According to Butler, deviating in this subversive manner is quite dangerous as long as the deviant is unintelligible. The unintelligible individual is frequently seen as a monster, an unnatural, disordered threat. The deviant’s novel behaviour often provokes anxiety – often profoundly disquieting anxiety. Needless to say, the individual who seems to be an unnatural person is not seen to deserve the full respect and rights that other, more naturally intelligible persons are granted. (I use the term “person” in a normative sense. I assume that treating
someone as a person *is* recognizing his/her dignity. When we humiliate an individual do not treat him/her as a person in a normative sense. Instead, we treat him/her inhumanely.) What is crucial to draw out from the subversive political power of deviance is that our bodies and the way we perform our bodies are central to subverting prevailing cultural assumptions and transforming the cultural climate. In this thesis I contribute to arguments showing how the human body is much more than a vessel that enables us to experience the world through our senses; embodied performances give meaning to and shape the world in which we live.

Within the first chapter I focus mainly on defending Butler’s claim that potentially significant deviant performances are embodied and repetitious. Less intelligible deviance can manifest in many forms but the kind of deviance that triggers liberatory socio-political change constitutes a statement of identity. In other words, the deviant lays claim to an intelligible identity; he/she claims to be a person who deserves respect and equal rights. Over time what was once considered unintelligible can become more intelligible; cultural norms, values, and expectations can fundamentally alter to accommodate or institutionalize an identity and performance. The term “unintelligible identity” may seem like an oxymoron. “Identical” is, after all, the root word of “identity.” Something that is identical (or at least similar) to something else cannot be unintelligible or indecipherable. When I use the expression “unintelligible identity” I do not mean that the identity is totally and utterly unrecognizable. What I mean is that a body consistently performs a culturally familiar identity when that individual should not perform it, according to dominant norms and standards governing such bodies, because it is seen as unnatural. For instance, an individual with a male body performing some aspect of a female gender identity is less intelligible because of the incoherence perceived between the individual’s body and performance. The female performance is not unintelligible; what makes the female
performance less intelligible is the specific body that consistently and insistently performs femininity. When it is performed often enough it can be understood as belonging to a set of behaviours and is therefore intelligible and identified with someone who consistently performs such behaviours. Thus, a claim to an identity and performing that identity can become more intelligible where before it was inconsistent or unidentifiable.

Butler’s analysis of performativity can help successfully explain how one struggles to become intelligible. As I show in chapter two, becoming more intelligible and less of a threat to others is a performative process. The performative process is a multifaceted bodily performance that must provide a sense of unity and coherence to the performer and to observers. One performs in the sense that one repeatedly, consciously or subconsciously, uses his/her body to express specific socially and politically significant identities such as gender, race, and ethnicity. What must be stressed about Butler’s conception of performativity is that one cannot cease performing. Performing does not need to be on an actual stage and does not need to be entirely conscious. No matter what situation one is in, one is always performing specific identities such as gender, race, and ethnicity. Moreover, repetition is also imperative to performativity and intelligibility. One only constructs or adopts an identity by repeatedly performing it to the extent that it becomes habit; it becomes a part of how one conceives of oneself and how one consistently behaves.

I bring in Jazz, a male to female transgender individual, as a case study to illustrate Butler’s conception of performativity and intelligibility. Applying Butler’s theory, Jazz’s feminine performance is deviant in the sense that it renders her less intelligible to most people due to dominant values and assumptions about how a biologically male body ought to naturally behave (Gender Trouble 22-3). In an attempt to make others accept Jazz’s feminine identity
claim and performances Jazz and her family employ mind-body dualist language and gender essentialist discourse. They argue that Jazz’s feminine gender identity is a direct expression of her female mind or metaphysical essence. They also describe Jazz as medically disordered because her female mind and gender identity do not match her biologically male body. Consequently, the medical community must treat her disorder with puberty blockers, hormones, and perhaps even surgery in the future. That is, Jazz’s disorder stems from her (and her parents’) sense of mismatch between her sexed body and her sense of gender identity. But the purpose of telling this essentialist and medical narrative about Jazz is to make her more intelligible to herself and to others so that she does not attempt to harm herself and, likewise, her peers do not emotionally or physically harm her for being different. In order for Jazz to become more intelligible to herself and to others the essentialist and medicalized narrative is repeatedly told to naturalize her consistent performance of femininity despite her biologically male body. It is Jazz’s consistency that enables her to be more intelligible to others and to open up the possibility of who can rightly adopt a feminine gender identity.

However, Jazz’s narrative is relatively conservative because it appeals to dominant cultural views about sex and gender, namely, that gender is an expression of some innate mental feature and, more importantly, that one’s sexed body must “match” one’s gender. This view promotes the dominant assumption that only a female body can rightly perform femininity and that is why Jazz must receive so much medical intervention. Jazz’s performance of femininity decreases her intelligibility but it fails, in certain respects, to bring about an entirely progressive narrative that supports the idea that a male body can adopt a feminine gender identity without needing to be changed into a more biologically female body. Nevertheless, I recognize there are progressive elements of Jazz’s performance and lifestyle. I do not think Jazz’s desire for a female
body so that she “matches” is necessarily wrong in any way. Rather, I suggest that Jazz’s body and performance appear to be wrong only because the limits of our current available discourse and dominant values regarding sex and gender prevent radical ideological shifts. However, radical ideological changes, to the extent that they are possible, will only begin to manifest through the repetition of deviant performances and stretching what cultural norms accept as intelligible, coherent identities.

In chapter three, to emphasize the primacy of the body to the human experience and how we understand each other, I stress the communicative power of the performing body. The purpose of this focus is to underscore how important the body is for evaluating whether one’s identity is more or less intelligible. I draw attention to the various ways in which bodies are given meaning and communicate meanings in relation to cultural situatedness. To explain the implicit nature of understanding people’s bodies and performances I appeal to Alexis Shotwell’s expansion of what John R. Searle terms “the background.” According to Searle “the meaning of a sentence only has application […] against a background of assumptions and practices that are not representable as a part of the meaning” (221). For example, because words can be employed in multiple ways (e.g. literally, metaphorically), background knowledge is required to evaluate, understand, and determine the truth-value of a sentence. Expanding the background beyond the sphere of linguistics we can see that the background implicitly informs us in all circumstances. Thus, the elusive background dramatically defines and ascribes meanings to bodies and habituates performances. These meanings and performances are laden with implicit prejudices and that is why evaluating and exposing aspects of the background is so important to dealing with discrimination, expanding what the background allows as acceptable performances, and prompting socio-political change.
I appeal to Vershawn Ashanti Young’s hyperawareness of what his black male body means and what performances are expected of him in relation to the background. His hyperawareness demonstrates that the background and some of its implicit prejudices can indeed be recognized and understood in propositional terms. Propositional knowledge is declarative and consciously thought of in the form of sentences. Therefore, Young proves that aspects of the background can be understood in a descriptive, comprehensive manner. Acknowledging background prejudices consciously and comprehensively can alter thought patterns and what we expect of sorts of people.

In chapter four I argue that certain bodily performances can, at times, communicate a message more effectively than propositional communication. Drawing from Shotwell, I claim, certain messages, given the situational context, cannot be effectively communicated otherwise. Shotwell recognizes that certain forms of knowledge are understood implicitly, that is, certain forms of understanding remain out of conscious thought and are not propositional knowledge. Shotwell is particularly concerned with implicit prejudices because they are often elusive and maintain unjust socio-political hierarchies. These implicit pieces of knowledge can very well come into propositional thought but the shift into propositional understanding is difficult. Our propositional thoughts are informed and influenced by implicit background assumptions. As a result, exposing implicit prejudices cannot be successfully expressed in comprehensive propositional terms in the first instance. Sometimes, exposing prejudices in this manner can take decades. I argue that bodily performances can, at times, communicate these implicit prejudices and aid in the process of bringing implicit prejudices into propositional understanding.

However, many (but not all) performances that are unintelligible are perceived to be real threats because they do not fulfill implicit background expectations. I recognize that not all novel
situations or unintelligible performances are perceived to be threats by many people. Some people actively seek out novel and even dangerous situations. For instance, one may seek out different cultures and ideologies and not interpret the cultural differences as threatening. One may even actively integrate a different culture’s ideologies into one’s own life. These sorts of people are much more open to cultural and socio-political change. Also, these sorts of people are more open to changing to how they conceive of themselves and others.

Nevertheless, many people perceive novel performances as threatening and respond to the threatening performances in a very physical manner because the performances are unintelligible. In addition, the people may not yet have the conceptual tools to express exactly why the performances are threatening and must be rejected. The performances are implicitly inferred to be “wrong,” disgusting, perverse, or unnatural. John Coates’ biological research and Julia Kristeva’s analysis of abjection constitute a solid framework for discussing the physical reactions people experience to novel performances and situations. What I want to demonstrate is that certain politically charged performers have the difficult task of communicating what has yet to be propositionally understood. That is, they must expose an aspect of the background thereby altering background assumptions regarding what is considered intelligible behaviour and identities. In doing so, certain performers are up against the force of people’s bodies undergoing fundamental changes that prepare them to physically lash out in rejection and abjection.

To clarify my argument I discuss my points in relation to what is commonly referred to as the “Black Power Salute” of 1968 that took place at the Olympic Games in Mexico. This performance attempted to expose not only the injustice of explicit prejudices but also implicit discriminatory background expectations and assumptions that inform people’s behaviour and propositional thoughts. The performance was unintelligible to many people. These men did not
perform black masculinity properly; they were too proud and suggested that all people, despite
gender and race, deserve equal treatment. The performance was initially very confusing and
threatening to many people and caused seriously harmful bodily reactions of abjection and
rejection. Hence, politically charged performers have the task of making explicit implicit
discriminatory background assumptions that systematically oppress and perpetuate unjust socio-
political hierarchies. Certain bodily performances, although initially perceived to be
unintelligible and threatening, can aid in the process of making implicit background assumptions
propositionally understood. That is, background assumptions about what is considered an
intelligible performance can expand and shift.

Time alone is not enough for this sort of fundamental socio-political change. Performances occur in time and time is needed, but just waiting through time for change will not suffice. We need to actively and repeatedly perform the socio-political change we want; we must perform our way through time. Over time and with repetition and discussion performances can be understood in propositional and political terms. But the political message cannot be expressed in propositional terms in the first place. That is why, in some circumstances, bodily performances can communicate certain things that cannot be communicated otherwise.
Chapter 2: Explaining Deviancy and Becoming Intelligible

Deviancy

According to Butler, significant deviant performances that change cultural climates are linked to our perceived, prescribed, projected, and performed identities. Deviant performances, which make one less intelligible, have the ability to undermine dominant norms and ideologies and can become more intelligible to others over time. However, before I clarify exactly what I mean by intelligibility and performativity I must stress that only some deviant performances that do not conform to social and cultural expectations can break down the legitimacy of discriminatory cultural norms and expectations.

Some apparently deviant performances are conservative because they reproduce and reinforce cultural norms, ideologies, and stereotypes. For example, the seemingly deviant drag performance of Dame Edna Everage reinforces discriminatory stereotypes. Charlotte Coles points out that drag performances like Everage’s are “conservative” because they “[present] an image of women which is stereotypical to the point of insult” (10). In essence, conservative drag performances “[sustain] forms of femininity which primarily serve patriarchal interests” (1-2). In these sorts of cases liberatory socio-political change does not occur. The kind of deviancy that has the ability to undermine cultural ideologies requires the performer to continually perform in a manner that appears unnatural and incongruous in relation to dominant expectations. In other words, the performer’s level of intelligibility decreases. One is typically perceived to be intelligible if the way in which one behaves fulfills certain expectations. For instance, a man’s level of intelligibility would most likely decrease if he behaved in what is considered to be a feminine manner. Continually performing in an unintelligible way has the ability to naturalize the perceived incongruity and break down certain cultural ideologies and expectations. That is,
the performance can bring about an understanding of the performer as similar to others in human terms. It comes to embody an intelligible claim of personhood.

Intelligibility

Intelligibility is, according to Butler, importantly linked to a repetitious performance of gender coherence. What makes us intelligible as persons, she argues, is “becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (GT 22). By this she means that a person is considered coherent and comprehensible in relation to social norms and expectations that (typically) include displaying coherence between (biological) sex, (culturally affirmed) gender, and sexual practice and desire (according to dominant cultural norms, both sexual practice and desire are assumed to be direct by-products of sex and gender or some internal metaphysical gendered essence) (GT 23).\(^1\) When I speak of innate essences or essentialism I am not making any sort of claim about what makes a human being a human being per se. That is, I am not claiming to know what all human beings innately need to live to fulfill what it is to be human, or when one becomes a human being in the reproductive sense. I am talking specifically about the notion of gender and the idea that gender identity, gender performances, and sexual practice and desire stem essentially from one’s biological sex (i.e. the genitalia or chromosomal formations) or some gendered metaphysical inside.

In fact, the way one’s genitalia look is not necessarily linked to “sex” chromosomal formations. Myra J. Hird clarifies that there are more than the two traditionally thought of sex chromosomal formations, XX and XY. “There are many variations of ‘sex,’” Hird explains,

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\(^1\) I recognize that in certain subcultures one does not need to display this kind of coherence to be considered comprehensible and intelligible. In these situations what is considered coherent ways of being are broader. However, by and large, coherence between sex, gender, and practice and desire is required for one to be considered intelligible.
XXY, XXXY, XXXXY, XYY, XXXYY to name only a few. […] The only thing that does not exist is a pure (Y or YY) male. There has been a case of a boy born with an XX configuration, however. […] Human imagination may be limited to a narrow understanding of ‘sexual’ reproduction, but nature persists in offering a variety of reproductive means. So human reproduction may yet resemble the kind of ‘reproduction’ most popular on this planet, which requires no sense of ‘sex’ at all (354).

With these facts in mind Hird argues (and other feminists such as Butler also argue) that biological sex, as a binary category (i.e. every sexed creature is either male or female) needs to be challenged or even abandoned. Hird wants to abandon sex categories altogether but she acknowledges that “for most feminists” sex categories are “fully grounded” (349). For instance, Margrit Shildrick claims that she “[has] no wish to fully abandon the concept of the feminine” (9). Shildrick maintains, “boundaries are fluid and permeable, not that they cease to exist altogether” (9). Ultimately, gender essentialism and sex categorization is a contentious topic.

However, one can be a gender essentialist without reducing gender to biological sex. Some people speak of gender as a metaphysically sexed essence. This “inside” gendered self cannot be physiological or chromosomal; nevertheless, it is spoken of as if it is the root or essence of one’s gender identity. As I discuss below, Jazz and her family speak of Jazz’s gender identity in these essentialist terms. They insist Jazz is really a girl on the inside despite her male body. They seem to believe that Jazz has a gendered mind or spirit. A virtue of Butler’s understanding of intelligibility and coherence is that it can sidestep these essentialist debates. An individual’s gender identity need not be understood or explained in relation to sex, as a category, or gender essentialist talk. It can be understood and discussed in terms of coherence and the degree of coherence one displays in relation to dominant norms and ideologies.
One could argue that one’s intelligibility is linked to other aspects of identity besides gender coherence and one could be unintelligible for reasons besides gender incoherence. This position seems reasonable because gender intersects with many categories such as race, age, ethnicity, etc. Intelligibility comes in degrees and is complexly related to these other categories. Nevertheless, the degree of intelligibility that is perceived is importantly linked to gender coherence. Even if one is less intelligible to others for a reason that seems unrelated to gender coherence, inevitably the degree of intelligibility is connected to gender coherence in some way. Ultimately, one’s personal intelligibility is necessarily linked to performing gender coherence. Gender coherence enables others to comprehend an individual and recognize that individual as a person as opposed to an unnatural monster.

At first glance the term “monster” may seem unwarranted but I am convinced that it is not. The quote below taken from Jeffery Eugenides’ novel, *Middlesex*, encapsulates why I chose to use the term “monster.” Within *Middlesex*, the protagonist, Callie, discovers that she is not like other girls. According to dominant expectations, she fails to physically develop properly as a woman. Callie is taken to a doctor where she is explicitly told that she is a hermaphrodite. Soon after her diagnosis she decides to adopt a masculine gender identity and switches her name to Cal. In the process of coming to terms with his own body and gender identity he seeks out the exact definition of the word “hermaphrodite.” Cal explains:

Following where the trail led I finally reached

Hermaphrodite – 1. One having the sex organs and many of the secondary sex characteristics of both male and female.

2. Anything comprised of a combination of diverse or contrary elements. See synonyms at *Monster*.  

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[...] The synonym was official, authoritative; it was the verdict that the culture gave on a person like her. Monster. That was what she was. That was what Dr. Luce and his colleagues had been saying. It explained so much, really. It explained her mother crying in the next room. It explained the false cheer in Milton’s [her father’s] voice. [...] It explained the photographs, too. What did people do when they came upon Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster? They tried to get a picture (emphasis added) (430-1).

The monstrous quality of Cal’s body is that it is unintelligible; it does not belong to culturally affirmed sex categories. One who is conceived by others or by oneself to be different, incomprehensible, or unnatural due to his/her unintelligibly is sometimes treated as, or thought to be, a monster. Monstrous qualities must be deemphasized or “cured” for one to become intelligible.

The example of a hermaphrodite, now typically referred to as an intersexed person, highlights how fundamental one’s physical body is to one’s intelligibility. An intersexed person prevents perceived gender coherence and intelligibility because the biological sex of the person’s body cannot definitively or accurately be determined in relation to binary male-female categories. That is, the individual does not fit into the dominant two-sex (biological) model (i.e. penis-vagina, male-female, XY-XX). Intersexuality, although not unheard of by most people, is still quite novel and monstrous to many because, first, the intersexed body does not cleanly fit into the standard categorization of male and female. Second, even if the category of intersexed is known by many people the nuances of how an intersexed body looks physically or manifests itself biologically is typically not known in depth by many people. As a result, how common intersexed people are is grossly underestimated by most.
The anxiety that surrounds an intersexed individual is due to his/her perceived gender incoherence. There are questions about what gender and sex should be assigned to a newborn whose genitalia looks intersexed. There is anxiety regarding what gender an intersexed individual identifies with and performs. Sometimes intersexed individuals are gender fluid, meaning they identify with both the masculine and the feminine gender simultaneously or at different times. Other intersexed individuals do not identify with either of the two dominant culturally affirmed “real” or “natural” genders, namely, feminine and masculine. Even if an intersexed person consistently performed a gender that fit in with dominant norms and assumptions and it cohered with sexual practices and desire, the ambiguity of the person’s biological sex prevents complete intelligibility. An unambiguously sexed body is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition of gender intelligibility. If an intersexed individual does not have “normal” genitalia (and astonishingly enough is not put under the knife immediately after birth) and decides against surgery to modify his/her “monstrous” genitalia, his/her intelligibility is dramatically lowered because a “mismatch” remains according to dominant assumptions.

Additionally, a different story regarding the person’s sexual practice and desire must be told. The typical story that one’s sexual practice and desire ultimately stem from one’s biological sex cannot be applied to intersexed individuals. The lack of gender coherence that arises from an atypical body rouses a considerable amount of anxiety. People are unsure what atypical bodies mean and therefore do not know exactly how to treat that individual. One is unsure, consciously

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2 For more information regarding gender and sexual fluidity, gender contradictions, and complexities see Brent L. Bilodeau and Kristen A. Renn’s article, “Analysis of LGBT Identity Development Models and Implications for Practice.”

3 The idea that the genitalia should be altered so they look “normal” incorrectly assumes a very narrow binary range of possible forms that genitalia can take. There are much wider ranges of people’s genitals that should not go unrecognized. While, the assumption that there are only two sets of genitalia and two corresponding genders is the current dominant cultural assumption, the two-sex, two-gender model of dividing human being up has not always been the prevailing view. For more information see Georgia Warnke’s Debating Sex and Gender, specifically pages 29-51.
or subconsciously, whether to treat such an individual as male or female. Coherent gendered bodies mean drastically different things to the extent that male and female bodies are often consciously or unconsciously treated very differently primarily because gendered bodies generate specific cultural expectations. The anxiety manifests itself through the way in which the atypical body is treated as diseased or disordered and cures and treatments are prescribed even if the body presents absolutely no health risks to the individual.

**Performing Intelligibility**

A key aspect to the intelligibility of a person is his/her series of performances. If the series of performances one enacts is coherent and continual one is likely to be intelligible. Butler speaks in terms of performances and performativity and relates it to gender because “[i]t would be wrong to think that the discussion of ‘identity’ ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simplest reason that ‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (*GT* 22). In other words, cultural norms constitute identity intelligibility; these standards require one to perform in a specific manner to be intelligible. They prescribe specific performances. Butler goes on to explain that the “‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (*GT* 23). Maintained norms of intelligibility and dominant ideologies prescribe meanings and expectations to one’s body and performance. That is, the body becomes gendered through becoming conceptually linked to specific types of performances and expectations.

The intelligibility of a person begins at (or even before) birth. Intelligibility begins when it is assumed that the genitalia observed reflect the innate gendered “essence” of the individual.
The expectation of coherence between biological sex, culturally affirmed gender, and sexual practice and desire, Butler argues, often prompts the behavior that “ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (*GT* xv). Strictly speaking, the expectation of gender coherence prompts us to sub/consciously habituate “through repetition and ritual” (*GT* 3). It is interesting to consider that a coherent gender performance begins before the child can even consciously perform anything at all, let alone gender coherence. A coherent performance is typically imposed on the child by the way in which the child is clothed and treated, and which pronoun, “he” or “she,” is used to refer to the child.

When a child is not expected by parents or guardians to perform gender coherently according to binary cultural standards, anxiety can bubble to the surface within other people. This point about the need to make the world intelligible within existing frameworks is well known in epistemology and metaphysics. For instance, Thomas S. Kuhn made the point using a psychology experiment in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (66). He noted that when people do not have a concept or category for something they look at the thing and do not see it; people become anxious when the thing observed does not fit with expectations or established categories.

Anxiety can also be observed when parents or guardians do not disclose key information about their child’s body, specifically, the child’s biological sex. Beck Laxton and partner Kieran Cooper did not disclose their child Sasha’s biological sex until Sasha turned five. Laxton recounts a specific incident that exemplifies the anxiety I refer to:

In the mother and baby group I was the last person to introduce myself and I said: ‘I’m Beck, and this is Sasha.’ And of course somebody said straight away: ‘So is it a boy or a girl?’ I said: ‘I’m not going to tell you.’ I discovered later that I’d been described as ‘that
loony woman who doesn’t know whether her baby is a boy or a girl.’ And I could never persuade anyone in the group to come round for coffee. They just thought I was mental. (Battle).

It could be argued that Laxton’s response is confrontational and some of the women probably felt alienated from her because of a perceived moral superiority. If she handled the questioning differently Laxton could perhaps have had better results. Nevertheless, asking whether Sasha is a girl or a boy and gaining an answer would probably have relieved some anxiety for many of the women Laxton was with because the answer would disclose the infant’s (innate) gender. Knowing Sasha’s biological sex would influence and alter how the women treat Sasha. And it is the subsequent gender habituation and inflicted expectations that Laxton and her partner so desperately want to avoid imposing on Sasha. These women Laxton was with, like most people, most likely assume that sex and gender are essentially linked or that gender is some metaphysical essence.

The assumption that gender and sex are essentially linked is most clear in a Today news clip about Storm, another child whose biological sex was not disclosed at birth.\(^4\) The broadcasters speak as though gender is sex or gender is determined by sex when the announcer states that Storm’s parents decided to keep the infant’s “gender” a secret. The child’s gender is not being kept a secret, according to Storm’s parents. As Storm’s parents wrote to their family, “[w]e've decided not to share Storm's sex for now – a tribute to freedom and choice in place of limitation, a stand up to what the world could become in Storm's lifetime (a more progressive place? ...)” (emphasis added) (as qtd. by Stampler). Storm’s parents imply that ascribing a gender to Storm will fundamentally limit Storm’s freedom. Cultural expectations would immediately be

\(^4\) The clip can be found at http://www.parentdish.com/2011/05/26/genderless-baby/.
imposed on Storm and most likely influence how Storm behaves, what Storm decides to do, and how people treat Storm.

According to Butler, being intelligible as a person is a performative process reliant on repetition and consistency. The embodiment of gender is key to successful performance of personhood; it involves maneuvering and employing the body in specific ways, speaking in specific ways (e.g. word choice, intonation, subject matter), and adorning the body in specific types of clothing and artifacts. For instance, one is not simply a man; one performs masculinity, refines and develops that masculine performance and must keep performing it. “Performativity is not a singular act,” Butler explains, “but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of the body” (GT xv). The “context of the body” is largely dependent on dominant ideologies and expectations. One’s body is imperative to one’s perceived intelligibility.

Thus, people whose intelligibility is at risk are those who do not perform coherently at all or do not perform consistently. What is crucial to note about the body is that it is a central locus to one’s degree of intelligibility. That is, one’s intelligibility is dependent on the body’s performance and a sense of coherence between one’s performance and body. But it also turns out that an individual, who is comparatively unintelligible, in light of his/her deviant performances, has the potential to make space for socio-political change. One’s performances are creatively subversive to the extent that they challenge seemingly fixed cultural frameworks for knowledge as in the case of performances done by the wrong bodies. Over time and with repeated performances, the sense of mismatch can diminish because of consistent performances and repeated exposure to the performances. As a result, the performer can become more intelligible. When the performer becomes more intelligible it signals a shift in cultural standards.
But this is not always the case. Sometimes a relatively unintelligible person strives to conform to dominant cultural standards as opposed to subvert and change them. One, who is less than intelligible, according to dominant cultural standards, experience oneself as unnatural, unacceptable, or monstrous. This sense of embodiment can generate self-loathing or anxiety. One may even accept the labels “clinically insane” or “unstable.” As a result, one may also seek out medical or psychological treatments. In such cases socio-political change is unlikely to occur because no assumptions, values, or expectations are challenged. The individual largely accepts that his/her unintelligibility must be corrected as opposed to altering cultural expectations and body politics.

Butler provides the example of drag as a transgressive strategy to undermine dominant ideologies about bodies and perhaps trigger socio-political change. Drag is a deviant performance in the sense that it is a performance of gender incoherence; it does not exemplify consistency between an individual’s biological sex and heteronormative gender, sexual desire, and practices. Nevertheless, drag performances do not always challenge norms. Drag is not so simple or definitive and nor are expectations about bodies and gender divisions. Many cultures include and promote ironic drag performances as a part of a way to emphasize the difference between “natural” gender and the willful subversion of it. The fact that these ironic performances are often literally on a stage or on an occasion that warrants them (for example, Halloween, at a carnival, or during hazing rituals) nullifies, or at least defuses, the subversive potential. In these circumstances the seemingly deviant drag performer does not identify as a deviant seeking to subvert dominant expectations and make socio-political changes. These performances reinforce dominant heteronormative values and support offensive stereotypes of women and homosexuals.
Consider the drag performances of Dame Edna Everage once more along with RuPaul and Lily Savage. The humour expressed by these performers is conservative because it reinforces the legitimacy of insulting stereotypes about women (Coles 10). Ultimately, conservative drag performances “[sustain] forms of femininity which primarily serve patriarchal interests” (1-2). What prevents these performances from being subversive is the fact that the performer and the expressed views regarding gender and sex are not deviant; these performances remain consistent with dominant cultural expectations and ideologies. The performer’s intelligibility whilst performing is not lost primarily because his/her gender coherence is not fundamentally ruptured. The performer’s degree of intelligibility does not decrease. Therefore, there is no broader cultural critique about altering what identities and modes of behaviour ought to be conceived of as coherent and intelligible. Rather, there is a reaffirmation of existing social boundaries and the legitimacy of including some while excluding others. The performer does not ask “anyone to question the labels they apply to people or their conceptions of real and unreal genders” (10). Although drag provides useful performances to subvert certain ideologies drag performances are not always subversive.

The drag performances that are deviant and subversive in the progressive sense Butler refers to are deviant and subversive because the performer’s intelligibility is ruptured. But the performer’s intelligibility is not simply reduced because the performer’s intentions, roles, and relation to others are unexpected and do not cohere with dominant expectations about how gender properly, or ought to, manifest itself. The performer insists that his/her performance reflects who he/she wants to be. Therefore, “[d]rag can be read as a disloyalty to traditional gender expressions, thereby denying claims of the essential nature of gender” (3). Similarly, as Ester Newton explains, a non-conservative drag performance
is a double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion [...] my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion, “my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ is feminine” (101).

Drag has the potential to successfully disrupt essentialist ideas about sex and gender and alter what is seen as intelligible behaviour.

Nevertheless, intelligibility is not simply an issue about how people are understood. Intelligibility also has to do with how people are treated. Unintelligibility is dangerous because others may socially reject, exclude, harass, abuse, and even kill the unintelligible person. Being intelligible as a person is also important for the individual so he/she can understand and classify him/herself as a normal, natural person with a sense of dignity. In order for one with an unintelligible identity performance to become intelligible, one must repeatedly perform the identity and continually tell a story that explains and rationalizes the seemingly incomprehensible and incoherent aspects of one’s performance and/or body. As Butler maintains, the crucial aspect to becoming more intelligible and altering socio-political climates is repetition.

But the socio-political change that occurs with repeated performances is not the same for just any kind of repeated performance. Not all repeated identities are progressive in the sense of being inclusive. For instance, someone could repeat a fascistic identity for a very long time but it does not undermine standards in a way that is progressive. Hate-filled identities can certainly be performed repeatedly. Unfortunately, hate-fill performances do undermine cultural standards at times because people find it difficult to resist the repeated performance or respect the people who
are hated. It matters what sort of identity and performance is repeated for the progressive socio-political change I endorse.

**Jazz**

Discussing Jazz, a twelve-year-old\(^5\) male to female transgender individual, will demonstrate how a significantly unintelligible individual must tell a narrative about the body to account for her deviant performances. But it is not just about telling a narrative that adequately explains the incoherent performance. It is about *repeatedly* telling the narrative and *repeatedly* performing the culturally deviant identity. Jazz adopts a feminine gender identity insofar as she continually performs it until that regime of feminine behaviour and performance becomes integral to her identity and other people recognize that femininity is integral to her identity and sense of self.

Jazz’s narrative about her body and feminine gender identity is that she is mismatched. Jazz and her family claim that Jazz is *really* a girl on the inside but is, unfortunately, trapped in the wrong body because it is a male body. Her narrative explains her consistent feminine behaviour in a way that many people can understand. Yet, in doing so, her narrative effectively explains her gender performance by appealing to dominant cultural frameworks that privilege and expect gender coherence and which threaten her coherence and categorize her as disordered. Even though Jazz’s performance (1) is unexpected in relation to dominant norms, (2) makes her less intelligible to others, and (3) has the potential to subvert dominant norms, the narrative does not necessarily subvert dominant norms about gender coherence. I do not want to imply that Jazz’s narrative is inherently conservative or subversive. That is, I do not think we need to or

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\(^5\) Jazz was almost twelve-years-old at the time of filming the documentary, *I Am Jazz* (2011).
ought to interpret Jazz’s narrative as either entirely subversive or entirely conservative. Jazz’s narrative has both conservative and subversive elements.

Jazz’s narrative casts her as a medically disordered individual because she is mismatched and, consequently, does not display gender coherence. Jazz’s failure to perform coherently necessitates a treatment, which is extensive medical intervention. Put simply, her male sex, her penis, does not match her feminine gender performance. For the prepubescent Jazz, genitalia are the main site of mismatch. However, during and after puberty the mismatch will be shifted throughout her body, and her embodied mind, in a much more broad and dispersed way. What I want to highlight about intelligibility in relation to Jazz is how imperative repetition is to becoming intelligible to oneself and to others. Even though Jazz’s body and performance do not match by current cultural standards they are consistent and continuous. The repetition of feminine performances dulls the novelty of Jazz’s seeming incoherence and enables people to see that feminine performances are a part of her identity. As a result, over time, Jazz is considered to be a more natural person worthy of respect.

I do my best to describe Jazz but I encourage you to watch Jennifer Stocks’ documentary, *I am Jazz: A Family in Transition*. The documentary is in one sense a unique account of Jazz and her family but in another sense it is a repetition of the story told by Jazz and her family that helps to reinforce their sense of Jazz’s identity. The documentary reveals how Jazz’s transgender identity becomes more intelligible to others. What is crucial to understand is that Jazz’s body is a primary locus to disturbing cultural expectations regarding gender coherence whilst reinforcing certain cultural ideologies. What Jazz’s male body means in relation to dominant standards does not coincide with her feminine gender performance. At birth and before the age of five the pronoun “he” was used for Jazz because Jazz was born with a penis. “He” was used undoubtedly
because Jazz’s parents expected gender coherence to naturally manifest. For the sake of consistency, to avoid confusion, and respect Jazz’s perceived innate feminine identity I do not alternate between pronouns; I use “she” for Jazz.

Her mother recalls when Jazz first learned how to walk she would sneak into her older sister’s closet and try on her high heels and play with her sister’s “girly” belongings. At first, Jazz’s mother confesses, she thought that this behaviour was cute, an aberration of sorts. As time went on and Jazz’s behaviour persisted Jazz’s parents began to think that her behaviour is more than just a phase. One key moment that led them to conclude that Jazz’s behaviour is more than just a phase occurred when she was a toddler. One morning after she awoke from what she describes as an “amazing” dream in which the “good fairy” changes her penis into a vagina, Jazz asked her mother when the good fairy was going to come. Coupled with the uplifting dream of the good fairy, Jazz experienced and continues to experience what she classifies as nightmares. These nightmares are primarily about going through male puberty.

Jazz’s dream about literally ridding her body of her penis because she thinks it does not rightly belong to her or express her gender, reveals a desire for gender coherence. Rejecting the genitals and desiring to be rid of them is not uncommon amongst transgender children. In fact, some transgender children and adolescents threaten or attempt self-castration or genital mutilation. For instance, four-year-old Danann, a male to female transgender child, expresses great desire to cut off her penis (Roberts). Also, as Ken Cooper explains, transgender children are much more likely than non-transgender children to self-mutilate (117). Unfortunately, he notes, that the tendency to self-mutilate, experience depression, anxiety, fear, and anger, and attempt suicide “is often taken as further evidence that something is wrong with the child. Rather than focus on the systems that will not allow these children to develop in their own way,
treatment usually focuses on the children’s ‘maladaptive’ gender identity” (117). Whether one agrees with Cooper or sees transgender children as experiencing some sort of body dysphoria it is undeniable that transgender children and adolescents experience great fear in relation to their bodies.

Jazz fears her body because of its expected puberty trajectory if no puberty blockers and hormones are administered. Male puberty would further prescribe certain meanings to Jazz’s body and influence how others think of her and treat her. But it is not simply about how people treat her. Jazz’s fear seems much deeper than that. She seems to be more afraid of how she will experience her own adolescent or adult male body. Going through male puberty will make her feminine performance seem even more unintelligible and incoherent and her experience of her own embodiment will feel profoundly incongruous. Before puberty, female and male bodies appear pretty much the same, except for the genitalia. Puberty typically accentuates male and female bodily differences. The male bodily changes are exactly what Jazz is terrified of. She fears growing a beard, not growing breasts and hips, and having a deeper voice. Equally, she does not want to be treated or thought of as a developing young man. The more she expresses these fears about her body, the more her parents have their own fears. They fear how Jazz will be perceived and treated by others because she possesses a male body yet performs in a very feminine manner. They fear that Jazz’s lack of gender coherence will prompt people to discriminate against, to harass, and to reject her. The threat to Jazz is not just external, as Jazz’s parents recognize. Transgender children, as mentioned previously, often experience alarming and debilitating depression, self-loathing, anger, and anxiety, and the suicide rates for transgender children are astonishingly high. Exact statistics are difficult to determine but the most recent research, according to Arnold H. Grossman and Anthony R. D’Augelli,
indicates that transgender youth experience victimization from their peers, negative parental reactions to their gender nonconforming expression and identity, substance abuse, and family violence that is similar to their LGB counterparts, who have higher rates of life-threatening behaviors than their heterosexual peers […] In addition to the exogenous factors of rejection, maltreatment, and victimization, youth who self-identify as transgender also experience personal distress and isolation (528).

It is evident that Jazz’s own body and performance is a threat to her because she experiences much anxiety about her body and its expected medically untreated developmental trajectory. Even if everyone happily accepts Jazz’s feminine performance, it seems her body will continue to cause her great psychological distress because she perceives a deeply disturbing incongruity between her sense of self and the appearance (and possible experience) of an adolescent and mature male body.

At Jazz’s fifth birthday her parents permitted her to openly perform femininity and allowed her to publicly wear a “girl” bathing suit. Before this party Jazz performed femininity in the privacy of the family home but was discouraged from doing so in public. This party was a pivotal moment for Jazz and her family because it was so public. Since the party, Jazz is supported by her family to perform her feminine gender identity any way she wants to inside and outside the safety of the family home. Of course in practice she cannot express her feminine gender identity in any way she wants. For instance, non-family members, such as the local soccer league officials, for some time disallowed her from playing on the girls’ team. The school administration, prior to changing their minds and regulations about Jazz using the girls’ washroom, prevented certain aspects of Jazz’s feminine gender performance. In fact, before changing the bathroom regulations, Jazz was ironically restricted to the nurses’ bathroom. This
restriction emphasizes the medicalization of her culturally diagnosed disordered body. But at her fifth birthday Jazz recalls experiencing elation: “I was so happy that I could just be myself” (Stocks 8:00). Her family recalls that the party was the perfect opportunity to tell their friends, extended family, and community that they “are going to allow Jazz be Jazz” (8:13).

Jazz and her family constantly receive questions and criticism from children and adults about Jazz’s gender identity and performance. They explain Jazz’s behaviour by stating that she is medically disordered; she has “gender identity disorder.” They say that she is mismatched; she was born into the “wrong” body. She has a girl mind but a boy body and she wants a girl body to match her girl mind. Jazz recognizes that “they [other people in and outside of her community] think that what I am doing and my parents are doing is wrong […] and they think that me as a person, I’m wrong, and that’s [the view that she is “wrong” is] just not right” (14:50). The consistent questioning and criticizing of Jazz’s body and performance reveals how paramount the relation between one’s body and one’s performance is to gender coherence and intelligibility. As Butler mentions, gender coherence “is desired, wished for, idealized,” and also expected (“From Interiority to Gender Performances” 362). When people do not display gender coherence, like Jazz, these people are perceived to be “developmental failures or logical impossibilities” (GT 24).

It is, however, quite remarkable and astonishing that Jazz and her family think it is wrong or incorrect when people classify Jazz as “wrong.” Jazz and her family do, after all, see her as wrong to the extent that her male body is wrong because it mismatches her female mind. The wrongness they perceive is evident in the way they explain that Jazz is medically disordered and therefore needs medical intervention. The perceived wrongness of the perceived mismatch is precisely what decreases Jazz’s intelligibility. Although Jazz and her family frequently state that
Jazz is normal and they are a normal family, they ultimately think that she is not normal because she has a medical condition that requires a medical explanation and medical intervention. Although the medicalized story about Jazz’s sense of mismatch helps Jazz and others to see her as more intelligible it is, ultimately, the medical intervention and adoption of a more feminine looking body that will make her gender performance considerably more intelligible. According to Jazz and her family, Jazz’s wrongness lies in her very lack of coherence between her body and her performance and subsequent unintelligibility as a proper, natural female.

Jazz and her family firmly believe that Jazz’s “true” inside self, her mind, is female and she is in the “wrong” body because it is male. Thus, according to this view, Jazz has an “untrue” self and it is her male body. Her male body tells a false story of who Jazz is; her male body is not a reflection of her “true” gendered self. Whether people’s minds are innately gendered is contentious. The point I want to draw out of the way Jazz is explained is that the repeated story that Jazz has a true gendered self that her body does not properly express is exactly what enables people to understand Jazz’s feminine performance. The idea that Jazz has a true, female gendered self and a body that does not represent this metaphysical self is very gender essentialist. The explanation of Jazz’s gender performances presupposes that humans are innately gendered; it assumes that gender affiliation, performances, and behaviour are byproducts of some innate gendered feature of the individual. It assumes that Jazz’s mind (as opposed to her genitals or chromosomes) predetermined her to play with dolls, wear dresses, and want breasts at puberty.

On the surface this essentialist way of describing her does not seem to assume that gender identity is necessarily linked to genitalia. Nevertheless, it does ultimately endorse this view because Jazz is considered by her family, and considers herself to be, disordered and incoherent until her body matches her feminine metaphysical essence and her subsequent performances.
The suggestion that one’s gender is predetermined by some innate gendered essence is controversial and I am not entirely sure that Jazz’s case illustrates the claim that gender identity is not fixed or predetermined by some gendered essence. After all, Jazz and her family speak very much as if Jazz’s ultra-femme identity was fixed and predetermined by a female essence from birth. Her family speaks of her as if she has always been a girl, from the start. They do not want to change her gender identity because they see it as an expression of her “true,” fixed self. They want to change social norms so that others will accept her as a girl in spite of certain bodily features that are not usually associated with girls. They also want to change her body to the extent that they can safely do so, in order to conform to the same norms of the female body type.

Even though Jazz describes herself and her family also describes her as having a fixed or predetermined feminine gender identity this may not be a problem for Butler’s conception (and my endorsement of her conception) of intelligibility and its crucial link to performativity. More significant than whether an individual has a gendered essence, Butler believes that people whose experience of gender does not fit with social norms about the correspondence of biological sex and performed gender identity are not intelligible as being properly gendered. Moreover, people who are not intelligible as properly gendered are not completely intelligible as people, and are seen as monsters instead. I think Jazz’s experience does illustrate this insight. In addition, Jazz provides us with an example of resistance to unintelligibility and all that it entails, even though she sees herself as disordered and mismatched. She is (at least insofar as we can infer from the documentary) an eloquent, responsible individual who possesses and demands respect. The personal strength she exhibits is both inspiring and a performance that effects socio-political change.
Jazz’s remarkable self-confidence and courage coupled with the courage of and unconditional support from her family enable her to survive the experience of being conceived as unnatural and disordered much better than would many other people in a similar situation. In this context when I use the term “survive” I mean she is surviving the experience of being cast by dominant cultural standards as wrong and mismatched in a very literal sense. She has not become a transgender child suicide statistic and does not at all look as if she is headed in that direction. On the contrary, she managed, with the support of her family, to become an emotionally stable individual who wants only respect. Jazz continues to survive and demands to be understood and respected despite the fact that many people see her and her family’s support of her feminine gender identity as monstrous or wrong. Ironically, part of what helps them cope with the difficulties they face in trying to make Jazz’s performance more intelligible to others and to herself is to rely on the culturally dominant concept that gender is a part of one’s internal essence and one’s behaviour is a byproduct of this gendered essence and they also rely on the medical community for support that has effectively labeled her disordered.

Jazz’s feminine performance and lack of gender coherence with her male body initially causes her to be less intelligible to her society and the medical disorder story that is told about her condition reinforces that idea that Jazz cannot experience a sense of coherence if her body is left untreated. Jazz’s desire for gender coherence, or in other words, a more female body to match her feminine gender performance, may make her intelligible to others because of the

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6 Many transgender children verbalize the desire for respect and see that respect is not granted to them because they are different. For example, a nine-year-old male to female transgender child wrote in a letter “I’m lonely and I have no friends because they hate me. Sometimes I want to kill myself [...]. I wish everyone would treat me with peace and respect. [...] That would be perfect but I try not to get my hopes up because no one is ever going to treat me properly” (“I Want to Kill Myself”). The TransKids Purple Rainbow Foundation (TKPR) posted this letter on their website for people to gain a better understanding of the anger and depression many transgender children experience but also to understand that all these children want is to be respected and loved. TKPR has kept the child anonymous.
projected reduction of incongruence between her performance and her body. Her desire for a matched female mind and body demonstrates the dominant conservative dualist ideal that in order to be a “real” woman one must be biologically a real woman as well as perform femininity. The extensive medical intervention that is required to enable Jazz to perform more gender coherence will effectively “treat” her disorder. As a result, she will, according to dominant norms about gender coherence, be properly united biological sex and all (for the most part). Jazz’s otherwise unintelligible behaviour is then explained away in terms of dominant assumptions about biological sex, culturally affirmed gender, sexual practice and desire. As a result, Jazz’s previous unintelligibility does not entirely undermine prevailing cultural norms but actually reaffirms the legitimacy of these norms.

I do not want to simplify or undermine the concerns many people have with the medicalization of transgender individuals. The relationship many transgender people have with the medical community is stressed. And many transgender people experience themselves as fighting against a long philosophical history of mind-body dualism. At the same time, many transgender individuals feel they need medical and psychiatric institutions for the treatment they desire. As Bernice Hausman explains, for some transgender people (like Jazz) technological intervention is seen as a necessity in order for them to express their gender the way in which they desire; “[b]y demanding technological intervention to ‘change sex,’ transsexuals demonstrate that their relationship to technology is a dependent one” (110). However, other individuals dislike the medicalization of transgender people even though it can offer benefits. Some argue

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7 I do not mean to entirely deny that there may be a essential, physiological basis for Jazz’s sense of self. Perhaps “gender dysphoria” belongs to a broader category of body dysphorias, meaning conditions in which one’s self perception does not fit with the body one has. There are people who perceive themselves as really one armed or lame, even though they have two arms and have the ability to walk. Likewise, people with anorexia have incredibly distorted body images. There are also darker skinned people who believe that they would be happier if they were lighter skinned. There is some research that is indicative of our association between brain anomalies and body dysphorias. See e.g. Iain McGilchrist, especially pages 66-9.
that the medicalization of transgender people disempowers the transgender community since it labels them disordered and mismatched. Susan Etta Keller points out that “by relying on this [medical] model, both transsexuals and courts experience a crisis of authority, a situation in which the invocation of outside authority both bolsters and undermines the actor’s own power and authority” (52). The transgender person, presumably the authority on his/her identity, seeking the medical intervention is oddly dependent on the medical authority’s configuration of it.

Jazz’s narrative is fundamental to her being able to comprehend herself as a person. People need to see themselves as an intelligible person for psychological reasons and even for the sake of action. As Claudia Card describes in *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck*, we put ourselves at moral risk when we undertake to live out alternative lives and values. The risk is that when other people do not understand us, we cease to be able to see ourselves as something other than crazy or “wrong” and then, eventually, cease to be able to act at all. People who live alternative lifestyles and have experienced oppression because of it must learn to “value themselves independently of service to outsiders” (42). In other words, in order for an individual to continue to live out his/her alternative lifestyle and struggle against seeing him/herself as crazy or “wrong,” resistance against oppressors or people who see him/her as “wrong” is required. Card notes that “resistance […] requires coming up with internal resources and reserving them for internal use, severing intimate connections with a hostile environment, learning to say no to external would-be controllers and to take the consequences” (42). It is Jazz’s narrative that allows her to comprehend herself as an intelligible person, which in turn enables her to continue to live alternatively and demand respect from others. The shockingly high suicide rates of transgender children demonstrate the need these individuals have to be
considered something other than “wrong,” “unnatural,” or “crazy.” It is unsurprising that a child who has preferences that are socially considered to be female would be psychologically at risk in a cultural environment that refuses these preferences to children who are not labeled as female. Jazz’s narrative is crucial to her emotional well-being. Her narrative keeps her safe.

What is most important to understand about Jazz and her story, however, is not that it reinforces some dominant, conservative ideologies about sex and gender. These aspects of Jazz’s narrative are not the subversive, liberatory aspect I want to stress. As Adrienne Rich points out, “liberatory politics is, after all, not simply opposition but an expression of the impulse to create the new, an expanding sense of what’s humanly possible” (154). Jazz’s continuous determination, courage, and eloquence express the impulse and desire to expand what is humanly possible. She wants to break the boundaries of who is considered intelligible and worthy of respect. Jazz’s family, community, and people who have heard about Jazz or people like her have had to reexamine their conceptions of gender and sex. In Jazz’s community, views about the link between biological sex and gender identity have shifted, even if only slightly. Jazz’s body and her repeated embodied performance of femininity, courage, and determination was effectively a locus of this socio-political change.

In spite of their essentialist and conservative elements, Jazz and her family’s narrative and understanding of femininity and womanliness are not blameworthy. Discursive limits greatly inhibit them from constructing a more radical narrative. The language and discourse that surrounds transgender individuals has been inherited from the institutions of medicine and psychiatry and the bureaucratic state (i.e., the administration of membership in the body politic, which requires that we all have documents which slots us into various categories, including sex). But even more significantly, the discourse reflects the long philosophical tradition that has
referred to the human being in dualistic terms: the mind and the body. Consequently, it is not shocking that Jazz’s family and Jazz speak as if the body and the mind are separate entities. Similarly, it is not shocking that they consider her to be medically disordered and they deliberate over medical intervention and treatments. The dualistic and medicalized language makes it quite difficult for certain kinds of radical change to occur. In spite of these discursive difficulties, Jazz does effect socio-political change. Jazz achieves this through her continuous courageous performance not just of femininity but also of demanding respect and striving for intelligibility. It is Jazz’s repetition of her performance that is important for naturalizing her identity, one that convinces others that she is a person worthy of respect.
Chapter 3: Background Expectations

Introduction

In chapter two I argue that one’s intelligibility is largely a result of, determined by, and dependent upon the performativie body. In this chapter I argue more precisely how exactly one’s intelligibility is linked to one’s performance. To do so I emphasize how cultural expectations influence one’s performance and ascribe meanings to bodies. Dominant assumptions, values, and ideologies, or “background” knowledge, are usually implicitly understood. Despite the background’s implicit nature, background knowledge directly affects our propositional thoughts, and our expectations, and influences how we perform. Shotwell’s expansion of Searle’s understanding of the background provides a framework to understand how the background divides people into sorts and categories that are laden with implicit prejudices. As a result, discriminatory ideologies are subtly perpetuated. Although the background remains, for the most part, implicit, it can and does come into propositional thought at times. When a discriminatory aspect of the background is propositionally expressed and understood, dramatic socio-political change can arise.

I examine Young’s personal account of his hyper-awareness of his performance of blackness, masculinity, and literacy. He demonstrates possible ways in which implicit background prejudices can be thought of and expressed propositionally. Furthermore, his account reveals how people express contents of the background in performances. When his performances fail to be coherent in relation to the background he becomes less intelligible. At times he is even verbally harassed for his incoherent performance. The verbal harassment is a sort of punishment and reminder to Young to get back in accordance with prevailing background expectations so that he is intelligible. He recognizes, on a conscious level, that if he wants to be
intelligible and, as a result, accepted and understood, he must alter his performance of race. That is, he must fulfill many of the implicit discriminatory expectations of the people around him.

**Knowledge and Communication: Verbal and Nonverbal, Propositional and Non-Propositional**

I do not conceptually pigeonhole communication in a verbal-body binary even though I speak of it in those terms at times. I do not conceptually dichotomize these modes of communication because I recognize that verbal communication and information expressed nonverbally often work jointly to transmit a message effectively so that listeners/observers can determine the meaning of the message. Even though I do not pigeonhole communication in a verbal-body binary and I admit its complexities, it is convenient and useful to speak in dichotomous terms here. Nevertheless, I argue that nonverbal performances and modes of communication, in some circumstances, can be more effective at transmitting a message and triggering socio-political change than propositional verbal communication. Nonverbal performances and modes of communication can be more effective because they can communicate what has not yet been verbalized or understood propositionally. The performance can convey the collective and social aspect of feeling that Shotwell recognizes as the fourth type of implicit knowledge (the types of implicit knowledge are explained in the next section, “The Background”). In other words, it politicizes that sense of emotional solidarity. Moreover, nonverbal performances often prompt a physical reaction that lead to active debate between people. Deliberation and debate leads to imparting and disseminating new philosophies regarding desired socio-political circumstances, new identities, and potentially transformative ideas. It is
the very confusion and unintelligibility of some nonverbal performances that provokes the sharing and shifting of ideas, ideologies, and expectations.

Likewise, I do not pigeonhole propositional and non-propositional knowledge into a binary because, as Shotwell argues and I defend, there is potential propositional knowledge as well. I explain in more detail below what differentiates propositional knowledge, potentially propositional knowledge, and non-propositional knowledge from each other. But, to provide a rudimentary understanding, propositional knowledge is knowledge that can be expressed, communicated, or thought of in sentences. Non-propositional knowledge is knowledge that cannot be properly expressed in this way. Potentially propositional knowledge is knowledge that can be expressed in sentences but cannot be expressed in this way yet because the conceptual resources are not yet available. These three types of knowledge intersect and work together to inform and influence one’s behaviour and propositional thoughts.

**The Background**

The ways in which the body looks and performs communicate numerous identities, values, and ideologies that have particular socio-political meanings. In other words,

movements of the body and the body itself indicate, display and signal who a communicating person is biologically (e.g. sex and age), psychologically (e.g. character traits such as introvert or extrovert) or socioculturally (e.g. ethnic/cultural background, social class, education, region or role in an activity) (Allwood 17).
Many of these categories implicitly, yet effectively place one into a socio-political hierarchy that reflects specific political interests and prejudices. These categories depend on and are informed by the background.

Shotwell’s development of Searle’s background helps explain our dependency on it. We need the background to understand our surroundings and be understood as intelligible people. Understanding the ways in which the background functions and places people into categories and unjust social hierarchies is crucial to beginning to undermine the discriminatory aspects of the background. Searle proposed the notion of the background in “The Background of Meaning.” He argues, “the meaning of a sentence only has application […] against a background of assumptions and practices that are not representable as a part of the meaning” (221). When we hear or read a statement we do not explicitly think of the background assumptions and practices that help us determine the meaning and truth-value of the sentence. Instead we implicitly and subconsciously infer them and refer to them. Searle provides numerous examples of background knowledge required to understand a sentence but I borrow only a couple of sentences for explanatory purposes. Consider the two sentences containing the word “cut” and what implicit background knowledge is required to understand the employment of the word and the sentence as a whole:

(i) Bill cut the grass
(ii) Sam cut two classes last week (221)

Searle explains that (i) employs the term “cut” in a more literal sense whereas (ii) employs it in a more figurative sense. The two different usages of the same term expose some of the background knowledge required to understand the two sentences. One needs to be familiar with how the word is typically employed in the English language to understand the statement. If one considers
the other words in the two sentences one will see that even more background knowledge is required to comprehend the sentences. Ultimately, background assumptions and norms are required to understand all statements. Searle notes that a way in which the background influences our thinking is that it explains the ways we divide up the world into sorts and categories and how we implicitly understand these categories. Even though the categories are implicit most of the time, they are crucial to our comprehension of language and to understanding the world around us.

Shotwell argues that the concept of the background Searle presents should not stop at language because background assumptions and frameworks are vital to the human experience, maintaining specific relations, and perpetuating specific socio-political ideals. The background is, therefore, politically influential because it also divides people into sorts and categories and effectively forms a complex socio-political hierarchy of people. These categories have long social and political histories and have entrenched, implicit forms of prejudices. These implicit prejudices of the background influence our propositional thoughts and our behaviour. As a result, the background functions as a very subtle and elusive form of oppression and discrimination. To understand Shotwell’s insights more clearly I explain the differences between propositional, non-propositional, and potentially propositional knowledge. I outline what she identifies as the four types of implicit knowledge/understanding. These four types of understanding constitute the background and influence our propositional thoughts and how we behave. From there the political significance of the implicit nature of the background should be clearer.

Propositional knowledge is descriptive, comprehensive, and declarative. By this I mean that propositional knowledge can be verbally expressed or consciously thought of in a comprehensive manner and the truth-value can be assessed and evaluated. For example, the
statement, “there is a picture of the Queen on the Canadian Loonie,” is propositional knowledge. Non-propositional knowledge is based more in experience, emotion, and know-how; it is the kind of knowledge that could never adequately be expressed in sentences. For instance, one’s knowledge and understanding of playing an instrument cannot be clearly expressed in sentences but other people, especially other musicians, can understand his/her experience in some sense. A piano player could explain what one does when one plays the piano. One can even attempt to explain how one feels when one plays. Nevertheless, the musician’s experience and ability to play cannot be reduced to statements such as “I sit on the bench,” “I read the music,” “my fingers dance along the piano keys,” “playing the piano makes me feel alive,” etc.

Lastly, potentially propositional knowledge is knowledge that has yet to be put into sentences. It is possible to put this knowledge into sentences but it has not yet been adequately expressed or expressed at all propositionally because the conceptual resources are not yet available. Potentially propositional knowledge is integral to Shotwell’s understanding of the background. She argues that certain implicitly understood aspects of the background are potentially propositional. Therefore, implicitly understood discriminatory aspects of the background could potentially be expressed and understood in propositional terms. Potentially propositional knowledge, if understood and expressed in propositional terms, can expose certain unjust prejudices and can also lead to socio-political change. However, it is difficult to bring the potentially propositional into propositional terms because our propositional thoughts are directly informed by the background’s seemingly common-sense implicit prejudices.

Shotwell outlines four types of implicit understanding that constitute the background and inform propositional, conscious thoughts. These forms of understanding do not remain distinct but interact with each other. The first type is practical, skill-based understanding (7-12). This
type of knowledge is non-propositional and is a foundation for propositional knowledge. Shotwell primarily references Hurbert Dreyfus to explain this type of understanding. Dreyfus notes that this kind of background knowledge is developed through practice:

although practical understanding – everyday coping with things and people – involves explicit beliefs and hypotheses, these can only be meaningful in specific contexts and against a background of shared practices […] We acquire these social background practices by being brought up in them (as qtd. by Shotwell 7).

The second type is socially situated, embodied knowing (12-5). Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu, Shotwell maintains that there is “a link between embodied understanding and the creation of certain common-senses” (12). Common-sense knowledge about what the body means and how the body behaves is informed by social practices and conventions that have very long histories. Bodies, then, are a “significant locus” for living out these histories and perpetuating social practices and conventions (12). For instance, when Jazz says she “feels like a girl on the inside” and she performs “like a girl,” these expressions of her experiences are not simply embodied experiences. What a girl is “supposed to” feel like and how a girl is “supposed to” perform are social conventions that appear to be common-sense. So when Jazz performs “like a girl” she performs specific social conventions regarding femininity that have developed and changed in historically and culturally specific ways. Thus, Shotwell explains, the body “displays and reproduces histories of its culture in the way we hold it, how we interact with objects in our everyday life, and how we interact with people” (12). Bodies are ascribed numerous meanings and values and are expected to behave in specific ways that are typically implicitly understood. These expectations and supposedly common-sense values and conventions are incorporated into our daily routines, lifestyles, and thought patterns.
The third type of implicit understanding is potentially propositional (16-21). Potentially propositional understanding is the kind of understanding that could potentially be spoken and understood in sentences but its epistemic content has yet to be put into words successfully. Gadamer explains that this type of knowledge cannot rightly be classified as non-propositional even though it is not propositional; it simply is not propositional knowledge yet because we are currently incapable of recognizing, understanding, and expressing it in propositional terms (Shotwell 18). Our implicit prejudices blind us and consequently limit what can be propositionally expressed. Prejudices and modes of discrimination often go unrecognized or acknowledged as such because they are implicitly understood to be common-sense values or beliefs. These types of prejudices often remain on the outskirts of language as such. However, implicit prejudices and modes of discrimination and oppression can come into propositional acknowledgement in the “move of understanding:”

when a prejudice comes into language, in the move of understanding, it is coming into understanding because its nature is primarily propositional. That is, although it seems correct to read the nature of prejudices, in their pre-interrogated form, as implicit and therefore not propositional, it also seems to be misreading to think of any prejudices as inherently nonpropositional, in the way certain skills and practices might be” (19). A lot of socio-political change is dependent upon bringing the potentially propositional into propositional understanding. Without understanding something in propositional terms and seeing a reason to fundamentally change the ways in which we live, think, and relate to each other, that sort of change will not occur.

The fourth and last type of implicit understanding is affect/feeling/emotion (21-4). Shotwell suggests that this type of understanding can bring the potentially propositional into
propositional understanding. She draws from Deborah Gould and recognizes how fundamental specific, implicit feelings and emotions are to social movements and political change (Shotwell 21-2). How and what we feel profoundly affects how we understand ourselves, our social surroundings, circumstances, needs, and what is required to fulfil our needs (22). However, Sue Campbell recognizes, our societal conventions can restrain our emotional expression and therefore can determine what emotions we actually feel. Shotwell, following Campbell, argues that feelings are not just individual experiences: feelings “surf the edge of a suffusive experience that is both personal and socially collaborative, both beyond the bounds of speech yet yoked to expressive possibilities” (24). The collaborative, social nature of emotions can provide conceptual and intellectual resources that allow people to recognize, understand, and successfully articulate in propositional terms how they feel. The aspect of collaborative discussion and pooling of resources is central to verbalizing emotions as socio-political concerns and enabling the potentially propositional to shift into propositional terms.

With respect to this last type of understanding I suggest in chapter four that certain performances can communicate the feelings of a collective social experience. Nonverbal performances are an expressive way to communicate what is, in a sense, “beyond the bounds of speech.” These performances can aid us in recognizing and understanding certain emotions that societal conventions have restricted us from feeling. These performances help bring the potentially propositional into our propositional understanding because they prompt a new sort of awareness of the social nature of certain emotions, whilst also articulating the importance of discussing certain emotions and issues on a political stage.

What is important to emphasize about Shotwell’s understanding of the background is that the forms of implicit understanding constitute the background and subsequently divide people
into sorts and constitute social expectations. The meanings and values placed on different sorts of bodies reflect specific political interests and, consequently, generate socio-political hierarchies, perpetuate stereotypes, and maintain unjust prejudices. Categories include (but are not limited to) race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Each category has attached assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices about how that sort of identity ought to manifest itself through one’s body. The category “woman,” for instance, is typically coupled with concepts of whiteness, fragility, docility, and physical, financial, and intellectual vulnerability. These assumptions about women implicitly affect how women actually perform and use their bodies, and how we expect women to perform. For example, I. Young argues that “we [women] have more of a tendency than men to greatly underestimate [their] bodily capacity. We decide beforehand – usually mistakenly – that the task is beyond us, and thus give it less than our full effort” (144). Implicit assumptions about women and the female body lead to a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. The implicit background assumptions about women influence what female bodies actually do, how female bodies actually behave, and what women think of their bodies. Subsequently, through the performing female body, historically discriminatory stereotypes are enacted and preserved and continue to have social and political power.

It is the implicit nature of the background that makes it so dangerous and politically forceful. However, not all background assumptions and knowledge remain unrecognized, elusive, and merely potentially propositional. Young expresses in propositional terms background assumptions people have about his black, male body and, consequently, how he is hyperaware of his performance in different social circumstances.
Bodily Meanings and Performances: Young’s Hyperawareness

Although Young does not explicitly state that his hyperawareness of his performances are hyperawareness of the background, the way in which he discusses why people expect certain performances and that these expectations are implicit prejudices makes it clear to me that he successfully communicates aspects of the background in propositional terms. Young’s hyperawareness of background expectations and the racist and sexist assumptions couched in those expectations demonstrate that it is possible to consciously recognize the content of the background. As he drifts through different racialized and gendered spheres what performances are implicitly expected of him change dramatically. The various expectations concern him because he recognizes the discriminatory undercurrents of these expectations yet he also wants to be understood by others to maintain specific relations with people.

Young recognizes the prejudices that constitute people’s expectations and he often deals with them by consciously self-policing his performances. Even though he wants to break down discriminatory stereotypes and attempts to in his book, *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*, he recognizes the importance of remaining relatively intelligible to others. Relative intelligibility allows him to avoid certain kinds of harassment, awkward social interactions, and questions regarding what type of black man he is. Ultimately, he policies his performance so that he literally and figuratively maneuvers himself reasonably successfully through social situations with varying power relations. Albert E. Scheflen explains that how people move their bodies (and consequently act in accordance with or against implicit background knowledge) “maintains and regulates human relationships,” which, in turn, “bond[s] them together and sustain[s] their power relations” (emphasis added) (xii). Young desires to maintain specific relationships with his family, friends, and colleagues, so he consciously refers
back to background knowledge to explore what prejudices are at work and to decide which performance he wants to perform given the situation.

Young specifically refers to background information regarding how he ought to perform blackness, masculinity, and literacy. These performances influence and intersect with each other. He explains that one of the reasons he is hyperaware of his performances is that he is quite different from the archetypal black American man. Or, as Young words it, he is different from “your average nigga.” The fact that he has been university educated and currently is a university professor, specifically of Rhetoric and African American World Studies at the University of Iowa, differentiates him from most other black American men. Others often assume, Young explains, that he is well-educated and different because of the ways in which he performs. More precisely, his demeanor, language, diction, bodily movements, and clothing communicate to people that he has been formally educated. In black and white social spheres, the performance of education marks him as different. Hence, he does not fulfill background expectations of “the stigmatized (and paradoxically romanticized) black male profile” (xii). “As a result,” Young continues, “I am hyperaware of how masculine I am (not) and how black I (don’t) act” (xii). Failing to perform the “average nigga” profile is often not taken kindly because of the perceived sense of mismatch. That is, since the background categorizes his body as black and male and his performances do not express background assumptions all of the time, he is perceived to be incongruous, inauthentic, and less than intelligible.

Young’s anxiety and awareness is very clear in the racial and cultural differences between the predominantly white university campus and the black barbershop. The social and cultural differences between these two locations make him hyperaware because he recognizes that his performances will most likely not fulfill all of the discriminatory background
expectations. Young explains that since I “participate in both sites, [I] suffer from the conflict that exists between them” (xiii). The conflict is that different situations are informed by different background assumptions and require different racial and masculine performances in order for Young to be perceived as an intelligible person. He continues, “[s]o in order to get along in the (white) campus and in the barbershop, [I] must alter not the colour of [my] skin but the ways [I] perform race in each location” (xiii). Depending on the circumstance, Young alters his performances to appear more similar to white university academics or to appear more similar to “your average nigga.”

Young goes on to confess that sometimes he wishes he could perform more convincingly like “your average nigga” because he envies “their self-assurance” (xi). He wants to “give a gender performance that would say unequivocally to everybody – white folks, black folks, everybody – that I too am a black male with balls” (xi). Doing so would increase his intelligibility only in certain circumstances. However, in those circumstances he would not have to alter or justify his performance in any way. On the contrary, he also admits that sometimes he wishes he were white so he would not have to continually demonstrate what kind of black man he is. In certain white spheres, like the university campus, he must perform in a way that communicates that he is an educated and professional individual. In other words, he must project that he is, despite his threatening black body (threatening according to specific implicit background prejudices), an unthreatening and intelligent man worthy of respect. If he could alter his race in different circumstances he would not have to perform in a way that attempts to prove (to himself and others) that he belongs.

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8 I assume the different performances he performs are not always consciously thought of. I suspect the different performances are performed quite habitually. Nevertheless, Young understands why these performances are expected and why he feels that he does not quite belong.
V.A. Young’s feeling that he does not belong because of the ways in which he performs (or fails to perform) is expressed in his poem, “shiny:”

as dark as I am and tryin’ to pass

somebody needs to kick my black ass

for using proper English all the time

when the rest o’ my family’s spittin’ rhyme
dressin’ all preppy, talkin’ all white,
somebody tell me this ain’t right

my skin so black folks think maybe it’s blue;

who am I foolin’, Two Eyes? Cain’t be you

I wash and scrub and cosmetically bleach

but this doggone pigment just won’t leach

so tryin’ to be white ain’t working at all,

since the only attention I get is in the mall

when heads turn to see the nigga with the silver dollar tongue

wondering, who dat talking deep from the diaphragm and lung?

as dark as i am and tryin’ to pass

somebody really needs to kick my black ass

for walking like a white man with my rear end tight

but when someone calls me stuffy I’m ready to fight

so I bring it on myself with highfalutin’ ways
livin’ like whitey did in the brady bunch days?

i been walkin’ so long down the other culture’s path
that i’m gone need me a little nigga momma wrath
to kick my butt and do it good
the way a nigga momma should
for me paradin’ ’round as white
when my skin is shiny as night
as black as I am and tryin’ to pass
somebody pleeease kick my black ass (38-9)

This poem captures the liminal existence Young experiences between black and white racial spheres; he does not seem to belong in either racialized space completely. Also, his understanding that the background has discriminatory undertones comes to the fore in this poem. For instance, recall, “somebody needs to kick my black ass / for using proper English all the time” (38). These two lines demonstrate the expectation that black people should not or do not speak “properly.” It is assumed that black people do not speak properly because they are uneducated and/or are not financially able to become formally educated. Discriminatory, racist assumptions about language, education, and literacy are particularly interesting and dangerous because they directly influence the ways in which black students behave in school and whether or not they speak what is called proper English.

There is a distinction between what Young refers to as Black English Vernacular (BEV) and White English Vernacular (WEV). The latter is considered to be proper English. “Shiny”
employs certain aspects of BEV. Under the broad umbrellas of BEV and WEV there are differences and nuances between groups and subcultures. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, BEV is seen “as foreign and different from the ‘language of the marketplace,’” that is, WEV (134). Thus, as Young describes, “literate practices intensify the burden of racial performance” and complicate the “task of proving what kind of black person you are” (140). When Young speaks properly (i.e. WEV) he is perceived to be “tryin’ to pass [as white]” (38). He notes that when he speaks properly many people think he is denying or abandoning his race. People assume that is acting in an inauthentic manner to receive certain benefits from white people. People who think this way tend find Young’s mode of speaking insulting.

However, language, education, and literacy do not simply intersect with race. They also intersect with gender. He explains that WEV, literacy, and education are often associated with effeminacy and homosexuality. Children even implicitly understand these sexist and racist associations:

Because some boys see school as a site of effeminacy and school language (WEV) as a discourse for girls, white and black boys resist some forms of language instruction, which in turn causes them to fail literacy classes. But the difference between black boys and white boys is that black boys not only feel coerced to give up their masculinity if they do well in school, but they also feel forced to abandon their race (90).

Given the fact that literacy, WEV, and education are associated with effeminacy and whiteness it is unsurprising that boys, especially black boys, resist it. These boys are being implicitly informed by discriminatory background assumptions about gender, sexual orientation, and race.

9 “Shiny” is a unique example of BEV. BEV is not typically employed in poetry and BEV poetry is not typically taught to students because it is not “academic.” Exploring the reasons why Young draws from BEV is very interesting. His choice to draw from BEV gestures at a lot of literacy and educational assumptions. It also draws one’s attention to the history of poetry and what sorts of people used to write and have access to poetry, namely, white men of a higher income bracket.
This resistance leads to the same sort of self-fulfilling prophecy I. Young discussed in relation to the female body and its supposed fragility and vulnerability. I do not mean to suggest that these schoolboys consciously make a link between education, literacy, femininity, and homosexuality. I am certain that most of them do not consciously recognize the discriminatory assumptions. The connections and discriminatory assumptions most likely remain an implicit type of understanding for these schoolboys; they remain a part of the background that influence their conscious, propositional thoughts, behaviours, and school grades. As a result, the behaviour and propositional thoughts of the schoolboys reinforce the legitimacy of some racist and sexist background knowledge.

_Shiny_ also expresses Young’s sense of inadequacy and anticipated rejection when he does not perform intelligibly as “your average nigga.” Young’s anticipation of rejection is not at all unwarranted. He confesses that he is often verbally harassed when he does not perform like “your average nigga.” His failure to perform intelligibly seems to require a form of punishment and social policing. In the poem, the punishment is expressed as the need for a physical beating. Although when some people fail to perform intelligibly they are physically beaten or harassed Young does not experience that form of physical policing. The type of policing he experiences is recounted in the chapter “Going Home” (17-36). Young recounts a visit home and recalls that he was, at times, made fun of or verbally harassed by old friends and even family for acting “white” or “gay.” The verbal punishment that Young receives is a direct byproduct of his failure to internalize the expected regime of behaviour that reinforces the legitimacy of background assumptions and socio-political power structures. In other words, he fails to make “your average nigga” regime his identity.
The fact that Young, or any person perceived to be less than intelligible, is punished demonstrates that the disciplinary regimes are, as Foucault describes, “not simply consequences of legislation” or “indicators of social structures” (170). The punishment tactics are informed by implicit assumptions and thus work to maintain specific power structures and political ideals. Since Young receives a form of punishment and policing for how his body performs, “we can surely accept the general proposition that, in our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment” (172). Rejection and the punishment are often enough to successfully police another individual’s body and performance and consequently reinstate certain unjust power structures, social hierarchies, and categories.

It must be noted that performance expectations, policing of behaviour, and perceived intelligibility are more complex than the dynamics of white-black racialized spaces and male-female gendered spaces: “views on racial performance and sexuality cannot be easily reduced to a matter of mere black versus white” (66). It is not simply that all black people are expected by black and white people to behave as “your average nigga.” For instance, he notes that some black people encourage BEV as an expression of racial solidarity; some parents/guardians teach their children BEV whereas others explicitly endorse WEV (2-3). Each person and situation he comes across is different; each person has different socio-political views and levels of awareness. It would be inappropriate to assume that all people expect \( x \) performance. Likewise, it would be inaccurate to assume that all black people expect \( x \) performance and all white people expect \( y \). In fact, the “duplicity” of expectations “marks the gender and racial paradox that black men must consistently contend with through racial performances” (66). The way people interpret
performances and read bodies can vary given one’s particular cultural habituation and awareness of discriminatory background assumptions.

Nevertheless, the ways in which we determine what a body means is typically a quick implicit process. What one assumes a body means seems to be part of a common-sense or part of the natural world order when, in fact, what the body is assumed to mean is imposed. Consider Riki Anne Wilchins’ insight:

We like to think, in Judith Butler’s memorable phrase, that physical features exist somewhere out there ‘on the far side of language.’ But even a feature as fundamental and measurable as my ‘tallness’ can only be derived through your reviewing a population of bodies, […] then carrying out (albeit unconsciously) an operation of comparison, then that tallness looks suspiciously to me like something you read on me instead of some innate feature in me. My measurable height may not be arguable; what it means is” (37).

Applying this insight to the gendered and racialized body suggests similar conclusions. Wilchins explains, “while skin colour itself may be on the far side of language, nearly everything else we can know about it and all that is culturally resonant is not” (37). Like Wilchins’ tallness, Young’s skin colour and male body are read onto him and have a long history of discrimination. The long history of discrimination regarding what black bodies mean and how that history influences our assumptions about black bodies are typically not thought of when one reads a body. Instead, the historical discrimination manifests itself in the implicit knowledge of the background. This form of prejudice can be just as dangerous and oppressive as more explicit forms of prejudices.
Summary

Once a body comes into existence it is “directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry our tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault 173). It is evident that the body communicates information about a person beyond emotive states and contributes to one’s intelligibility. But what is more important to recognize is that background socio-political hierarchies and prejudices dictate whether one is perceived to be intelligible. The body is not a neutral vessel that carries us through the world and enables us to interact with the world. Our embodied experience reveals this fact to us; our experience is much more than a sequence of sensational experiences. The body expresses very political ideals and unknowingly reinforces unjust socio-political values. The body is a site for reinforcing the legitimacy of background knowledge through its performances. But the implicit nature of the background can be understood in propositional terms, as Young demonstrates.
Chapter 4: A Salute to the Potentially Propositional

Introduction

The first three chapters argue that our bodies and our sense of embodiment are a primary locus with respect to how we determine intelligibility. What our bodies look like and which performances our bodies enact help us to understand ourselves and others, and determine people’s positioning within social hierarchies. The background implicitly informs the ways in which we evaluate and determine intelligibility. Unfortunately, some of the implicit knowledge that comprises the background is discriminatory and systematically oppresses people in an elusive way. In order to reveal the potentially propositional background prejudices they must be understood and expressed in a propositional manner. In this chapter I want to show exactly how the performing body is a vital instrument to bring the potentially propositional into propositional terms and to prompt socio-political change. I argue that certain performances communicate and reveal things that cannot, in the first instance, be communicated in any other way because of the background. As Shotwell argues, propositional understanding is always dependent upon the background, which consists of bodily dispositions, social practices, and implicit prejudices that appear to be common-sense knowledge. However, it must also be noted that the body is also profoundly physically affected by performances that are perceived to be unintelligible. These physical reactions and deeply felt emotions demonstrate Campbell and Shotwell’s understanding of the collaborative, social aspect of feelings. That is, certain performances communicate collective emotional experience that is “both beyond the bounds of speech yet yoked to expressive possibilities” (Shotwell 24). What these types of performances do is to enable people to recognize certain emotions and consequently pool intellectual resources to voice these emotions in a political and propositional manner.
People’s bodies tend to literally resist unintelligible performances because implicit background knowledge informs them that the performance is “wrong” or unnatural. I draw from Kristeva’s theory of abjection and Coates’ biological and neurological research to describe how the body feels and reacts to novel, seemingly threatening performances and physically resists them. The bodily reactions reveal exactly how repulsive and threatening deviant performances can be perceived to be. People respond so physically to unintelligible performances for many reasons. On a physiological level, people respond so physically to unintelligible performances partly because they feel threatened and the body naturally prepares for defense. However, in some circumstance, people do not quite have the conceptual tools to propositionally know exactly what the performance means and how it can be categorized. For instance, I may propositionally think that I believe in equality but experience a feeling of disgust and revulsion toward a performance of equality such as the Black Power Salute of 1968. My sense of revulsion may very well indicate that I do not in fact believe in equality due to implicitly maintained beliefs and prejudices. These implicit beliefs and my unawareness of them can prevent me from understanding exactly why I find the performance disgusting or that my reasoning for finding the performance disgusting is actually based on unwarranted discriminatory values regarding who deserves equal treatment. Although I may not be able to immediately state in propositional terms exactly why I find the performance repulsive because I do not yet have the conceptual resources, the performance forces me to recognize certain emotions and attempt to propositionally understand the potentially propositional. Ultimately, I want to demonstrate that bodily performances can help reveal implicit background prejudices and bring them into propositional terms.
I apply my argument and Kristeva’s and Coates’ insights to the Black Power Salute. This nonverbal performance helped communicate a collective feeling of oppression. It also aided in the process of exposing, in propositional terms, unwarranted implicit background values and assumptions. The salute was of course not the trigger to the Black Power movement and it was not the first attempt at bringing potentially propositional racial prejudices into propositional understanding. When the salute took place many people before had verbalized the injustice of racist values. However, the injustice had yet to be propositionally understood by many people. Unfortunately, for many people, the unjust and discriminatory background values were seen as common-sense values and were yet to be understood propositionally. What the salute did was aid in the process of making clearer and more understandable the political concerns of human rights because it roused so much emotion and such international debate. The performance encouraged the feeling of solidarity, which in turn encouraged other performances that promoted values of human rights and equality. In other words, the bodily performance communicated an emotional and political message that could not have been adequately communicated otherwise in the first instance.

**Abjection**

Kristeva suggests, “food loathing is perhaps the most archaic form of abjection” (230). When one tastes something repulsive one’s entire being engages: “I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat […] nausea makes me balk” (author’s emphasis) (230-1). Some individuals even have these bodily reactions to the mere scent of a food. The noteworthy reflection Kristeva makes about these intense and often unavoidable
bodily responses to food is that “‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it” (231). Since the food I eat is not an Other, in a very literal sense “I expel myself; I spit myself out, I abject myself” (author’s emphasis) (231). One is repulsed to the extent that one turns oneself inside out and expels a part of oneself; the “I,” she explains, is expelled and rejected. But it is not simply about rejecting and expelling a specific food because it is unpalatable. One may reject a food even before one smells or tastes it. One rejects it on the grounds that it is different. One may reject it without consciously knowing why in propositional terms; the different food is implicitly assumed to be a type of threat. New and different foods are often assumed to be distasteful or cause sickness. People who maintain this assumption and do not assimilate the food are erring on the side of caution.

But abjection expands beyond food loathing. People can (and do) display abjection towards political dispositions and unintelligible performances, for instance. Individuals may loathe and abject performances or bodies simply because they are different from what they expect or assume to be natural. Thus, abjection is not necessarily a reaction to “a lack of cleanliness or health,” in the literal sense of disgust. What causes abjection can be “what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (232). Unintelligible individuals, then, are not inherently disgusting but are disrupting identities, system orders, and rules. Hence, according to implicit background ideologies, unintelligible individuals symbolize something perverse, monstrous, and threatening to common-sense values. Deviant performances can be threatening to the background to the extent that they have the potential to aid in the process of voicing a potentially propositional piece of discriminatory knowledge in propositional terms. Our prejudices are then exposed in a way that we can understand and recognize. In turn, socio-political change can occur. By extension, deviant performances can be a threat to the ways in which many people live their
lives, engage in social relations, and comprehend themselves and others. Deviant performances have the ability to expose, expand, or shift what the background recognizes as intelligible behaviour.

Similar to food abjection, a natural response to a perceived threat is to reject it and defend oneself against it. Kristeva notes that people display their inability to understand/accept a performance and display their sense of disgust by expelling a part of themselves. For example, one may spit, vomit, gag, or cry. One may aim these expulsions at the performer or performance experienced as disgust provoking. These physical expulsions metaphorically represent one’s inability to swallow, digest, or accept the performer as natural. One rejects it and expels a part of one’s body as if it were the performer. It is not simply about rejecting a person because of his/her performance. It is about rejecting the performance because it fails to fulfill implicitly held background values and prejudices. The performer’s intelligibility decreases and the performer is conceptually linked to the perverse. Kristeva explains that “the abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law, but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (241). The deviant performer denies the legitimacy of certain aspects of the background and wants to transform what the background accepts as intelligible behaviour. By doing so, the performer must bring discriminatory implicit assumptions into propositional understanding.

What can be drawn from the concept of abjection is that one does not simply overcome prejudices by merely demanding, propositionally, respect as a person. One must expose implicit parts of the background and bring them into conscious propositional understanding. What is imperative to exposing implicit parts of the background is, as Shotwell argues, the fourth type of implicit understanding: affect/feeling/emotion. The social and collaborative nature of this type of
implicit understanding helps us recognize certain feelings, pool intellectual recourses, and put those feelings into coherent statements so they can have a political effect and become propositional knowledge. Certain performances have the ability to help us recognize certain emotions and collaboratively come together to discern how these emotions can be expressed propositionally and what political changes are required. However, repetition of the political concern via performances, as Butler suggests, is imperative to socio-political change as well. That is, its performance and repetition is vital to the process because it is a way to demonstrate emotional solidarity, live out socio-political change, and express the potentially propositional before it is clearly expressed or understood in propositional terms. It is not necessarily about performing one specific performance over and over again. However, this does happen and can be useful. It is more about altering the way in which one performs on a daily basis. For instance, if I am fighting for equal rights it is not enough to make the Black Power Salute over and over again (even though I may do so in various circumstances to express my solidarity and support). It is about altering my thought patterns and how I treat people. In spite of vehement rejection, abjection, and possible humiliation, repetition is imperative to living out and bringing about socio-political change.

In essence, a performance’s claim regarding discrimination remains potentially propositional until certain conceptual resources are available. Until then, we do not yet have the language and tools to understand the claim entirely. That is, there may be a sense of confusion regarding the performance due to its unintelligible nature. But the performance would communicate a specific collective feeling of emotional solidarity before that common feeling of oppression is successfully expressed and propositionally understood. Therefore, certain performances have the ability to communicate a specific meaning that could not have been
communicated otherwise due to our limited conceptual tools. The body’s performance is crucial to socio-political change because it can register and express feeling and emotion, which are imperative, as Shotwell argues, to expressing the potentially propositional. Repeating performances that express a collective emotion will continually prompt discussion, debate, collaboration, and a pooling of intellectual ideas to bring the implicit background into propositional understanding by producing the required conceptual tools.

However, performances do not simply cause people to recognize a collectively experienced emotion and generate a sense of solidarity. They cause other groups of people to collectively abject. We do not simply perform our abjection; we feel it intensely. Our bodies undergo fundamental biological changes such as, hormone changes; our blood redistributes throughout our body; our heartbeat increases; and our blood pressure increases. There are fundamental, physiological signs that our bodies are in a state of distress when we are in novel situations that are inferred to be threatening or “wrong.” Science has only recently been able to explore the ways in which our physiology changes. These biological responses that bring about feelings of anxiety influence our performances of abjection and disgust.

**Risks and Threats: Neurological and Physiological Reactions**

Coates studies the ways in which one’s physiology alters when one takes a risk, comes across a novel situation, or when an unanticipated new pattern emerges. These situations are often times perceived to be threatening. For one’s physiology to change and engage the threat need not be a physical threat, although sometimes it is. Coates mainly focuses on the biological reactions that occur among players in financial markets when they take financial risks or experience threats to stable financial markets. He also briefly touches on military and sport risks.
and threats. He states that it is easy to understand that our entire body engages when faced with uncertainty or novelty when we consider the distress we feel when we watch a sports game we are emotionally invested in. During a sports game we may physically jump up, twitch, and shout but also our heart rate will increase, we may sweat, and feel anxious and excited. Sports aside, Coates recognizes that the conclusions that he draws from his biological and neurological research can be applied to almost any sort of risk or threat. When Coates’ scientific research and conclusions are considered alongside Kristeva’s philosophical conclusions regarding the body and are applied to deviant performances we can understand that what goes on beneath the surface of the skin influences our performances of abjection, rejection, and distress. When we consider physiological reactions in relation to certain deviant performances we understand that people are fundamentally disturbed when certain implicit background expectations are not fulfilled.

When it comes to evaluating risk-taking and threats in relation to performativity and intelligibility the distinguishing line between taking a risk and being a threat is not easily definable. Whether one’s action is a risk or a response to a perceived threat is not entirely clear. When one performs in a less than intelligible manner to make a specific socio-political claim to personhood one is both taking a risk and is responding to a perceived threat. One is risking one’s psychological well-being, as discussed in relation to Jazz in chapter two. One’s psychological well-being is risked because one may actually begin to see one as “wrong.” One’s physical well-being is also risked; other people may do more than verbally harass and reject one’s performance. But the performer is also responding to a threat, namely, dehumanization and oppression. When such a risky performance is executed one is a threat to background frameworks and assumptions that provide stability to a society and culture. When one performs in a deviant manner one is immediately seen as a threat to many people because the performance
is confusing and unintelligible in some way. But the exact reason why one is perceived to be a threat most likely remains implicit and out of propositional thought. Similarly, when one observes a deviant performance and perceives it to be a threat, one takes a risk by responding to the performance as if it were a threat. For instance, the performer, and others who support the performer, may verbally or violently counter-attack. Whether one is responding to a threat or taking a risk is unclear. Taking a risk and responding to a perceived threat seem to be intertwined. What is common to both risk-taking and responding to a perceived threatening performance is the fundamental physiological engagement.

As noted previously, things that are unfamiliar are often implicitly assumed to be a threat. Therefore, the body physically prepares for action. The entire body physically engages as a whole and reacts, Coates explains, as opposed to simply engaging cognitively, because the areas of the brain that carry out our reasoning skills to comprehend situations and seek out patterns are tied up with our motor circuits (33). That is, the brain and the body are not distinct from each other and cannot react separately. Human beings are not comprised of two distinct entities but are a united whole. What can severely undermine or prevent understanding of the situation is not that we are incapable of reasoning but that what is being expressed cannot be propositionally understood yet. Since one’s propositional thoughts are informed by implicit background assumptions the propositional explanation of the performance is simply not available yet.

When people take risks or anticipate an approaching threat their metabolism speeds up, breathing accelerates, heart rate increases, blood pressure increases, the face becomes flushed, the nervous system redistributes blood “constricting blood flow to the gut, giving them the butterflies […] and shunting it to major muscle groups in the arms and thighs as well as to the lungs, heart and brain” (8-9). Steroid hormones are also released and testosterone levels climb,
which increases confidence; adrenalin is released, which quickens physical reactions, and cortisol is released, which causes the release of dopamine and the feeling of pleasure and perhaps sexual arousal (8-9). These physiological responses generate the overall feeling of distress and anxiety. The bodily reactions that generate the feeling of distress effectively tell us that circumstances are not normal; things are under threat or may be under threat in the near future. These uncomfortable bodily feelings often times prompt abjection and rejection. What I want to highlight here is that often times we feel threatened (physically and emotionally) before we can necessarily propositionally understand that threat.

Consider Coates’ knowledge of biological responses and Kristeva’s understanding of abjection to the incident that is typically referred to as the Black Power Salute. It took place at the Summer Olympic Games in Mexico on the 16th of October 1968. Gold medalist Tommie Smith, and bronze medalist John Carlos, stood on the podium making the Black Power Salute. The silver medalist, white Australian native, Peter Norman, wore a human rights badge to demonstrate his support. The human rights badge echoes Smith’s later explanation that the salute was not simply a “Black Power” salute but a salute to human rights. “To this very day,” Smith clarifies in his autobiography, Silent Gesture, “the gesture made on the victory stand is described as a Black Power salute; it was not. Nor was it only about black athletes […] It was the Olympic Project for Human Rights. It was more than civil rights” (author’s emphasis) (22).

**The Olympic Project for Human Rights**

Smith and Carlos’ intelligibility as black men decreased due to the performance they carried out. Their performance and their black bodies seemed mismatched to a lot of people according to dominant background ideologies of the time. To harken back to previous chapters,
the salute demonstrates that one’s body is integral to one’s intelligibility. According to background assumptions and social hierarchies at that time, black bodies cannot rightly behave in that manner; black bodies should not project a sense of pride for their blackness. Although Butler’s analysis of intelligibility and gender coherence do not seem to be particularly applicable here since there does not seem to be an incongruity with respect to Smith and Carlos’ gender coherence, her analysis is applicable. Gender performances and racial performances intersect. Smith and Carlos’ performance is incongruous because they are not performing black masculinity properly. Black male bodies, according to background assumptions at that time, ought not project a sense of pride or power the way in which, say, white male bodies should. Under assumptions at that time, if a white male performs in a way that projects a sense of pride and power, the white man is intelligible as a man properly performing adult white masculinity.

Most people probably did not immediately understand in propositional terms the socio-political claim that the performance signified, namely that black people, or more accurately, all people, are worthy of equal respect and social and political justice. Nevertheless, the performance aided in the process of bringing these issues into propositional understanding. Using Kristeva’s terms, Smith and Carlos did not respect (ideological) borders, positions or rules; they disturbed a system order which repulsed many people. But what exactly was thought to be repulsive about their performance remained elusive to many for a long period of time. The salute supports my suggestion that bodily performances can, in some circumstances, communicate a message that could not have been communicated otherwise.

I recognize that the salute is not the first performance to attempt to bring the potentially propositional into propositional understanding. The potentially propositional racist ideologies at the time were, in a sense, in a liminal state between potentially propositional and propositional.
That is, the racial injustice had yet to be propositionally understood by many people, but not all. At the time, the unjust and discriminatory background values were common-sense and were not understood in propositional terms. What the salute prompted was a sense of solidarity between many groups of people with respect to their experienced oppression and prejudice. It aided in the process of making clearer and more understandable the political concerns of human rights because it provoked international debate and encouraged the progress of the Black Power movement and human rights in general.

What the salute communicated, made aware to people, and achieved could not have been communicated otherwise. It could not have been communicated otherwise not simply because the Olympic venue inhibited Smith and Carlos from making a speech on the podium. It could not have been communicated otherwise because what they attempted to communicate was, for most people, still only potentially propositional. Over time, with a lot of repetition, and pooling of intellectual resources, the performance began to make sense in propositional terms to people who did not understand it before. Others began to propositionally understand the injustice of this discrimination and the claim about human rights. Once the socio-political concern was propositionally verbalized, radical socio-political change continued. What Smith, Carlos, and the entire movement were up against were bodies roused by fundamental physiological changes and unavoidable abjection. Also, they faced the onerous task of putting implicit, racist background assumptions into propositional terms. Performers cannot simply demand that people reevaluate assumptions. They have to make the injustice of the assumptions explicit. Doing so is a process that must begin with repeated bodily expressions and living out the socio-political change desired. Through repetition, the perceived sense of novelty and threat can begin to dull and...
people can begin to engage in discussion and debate and pool intellectual resources to bring the potentially propositional into the propositional realm.

Put simply, people reacted so vehemently against the seemingly simple gesture because the performance was novel on multiple levels. First, the black masculine bodies of the athletes, according to background assumptions of the time, did not match the performance of manly defiance and pride. That is to say, there was a seeming incongruity because these black bodies were not performing in a subservient manner. The perceived “wrongness” or incongruity was most likely not understood propositionally but implicitly inferred by the audience. As a result, the men’s intelligibility decreased. Second, the situation was novel because black individuals represented the United States of America as exemplar, American citizens but these individuals were not recognized in America as people worthy of full rights and respect. The fact that these men, and other people who supported the Black Power movement, demanded respect was disruptive to many people’s implicit and explicit views about the inherent inferiority of black individuals. Thirdly, the performance was at the Olympics; it was carried out on an international scale. The issue of equality in America sparked an international sense of solidarity between certain groups of people. It also sparked debate, inquiry, and discussion. I am certain the international interest the performance prompted helped rouse repeated protests against racial injustices. I am also certain the performance increased emotional solidarity, which, in turn, provided a larger pool of intellectual resources to draw upon to help voice the concerns of protestors in propositional and political terms.

At its core, the performance was novel because of the context in which it was performed. The performance only influenced the international community by virtue of the prevailing political climate of the time. The performance only meant what it meant because of the specific
ideologies implicitly and explicitly held in America, at the Olympic Games, and more broadly, in the world at that historical moment. The performance only meant something political because black bodies meant a specific something and were treated in a specific manner because of that meaning. In a white supremacist world black bodies were explicitly and implicitly considered intrinsically inferior and were treated as such. Smith recognizes,

it was more than two athletes standing with our fists in the air. In fact, our standing with our fists in the air isn’t the most important thing about it […]. We could have been standing on our heads, we could have been raising white fists instead of black ones, but the message we were sending comes from the context […]. It happened at a certain time and place in history, and because of that, it was done a certain way (245).

It was more than two athletes standing with their fists in the air because these were black athletes standing with their fists in the air. The blackness of their bodies made their performance seem incongruous. The performance did not align with implicit background assumptions about how black bodies ought to behave and where black bodies belong on the socio-political hierarchy. As a result, the performance was a threat to certain implicit aspects of the background, the ways in which people live their lives, and the ways in which people propositionally think.

Although the performance communicated, beyond language barriers, the collective experience and feeling of oppression it also occasioned abjection and rejection because many people did not propositionally understand what was being communicated. Before radical socio-political change began to manifest, the performance was (and others like it were) unintelligible. That is, many people did not yet understand what the performance was trying to express. As a result, Smith, Carlos, and even Norman were threatened, spat on, and hated. In fact, Smith and

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10 I do not mean to imply by speaking about the salute and racism in past tense that racism is no longer a socio-political issue or that racial prejudices have been eradicated from the background. Implicit racial prejudices still plague the background and need to be dealt with.
Carlos were forced to leave the Olympic village all together. Once they returned to America, they and their friends and family faced death threats and various kinds of harassment. Of course these two men were not the only individuals who experienced such hatred and abjection. Many others who supported and displayed solidarity with the performers were beaten, killed, raped, abjected, and harassed. This systematic hatred and abuse continued long after the performance because Smith, Carlos, and their supporters refused to change their performances; they continued to demand respect. They refused to fall in line with background assumptions.

Although it is interesting to consider the biological changes that occurred in the bodies of Smith, Carlos, and Norman the biological and physical reactions of the observers are of more importance here. They are more important to consider because they demonstrate Kristeva’s understanding of abjection and Coates’ biological observations. Moreover, the bodily reactions of the immediate audience and people around the world demonstrate the perceived sense of unintelligibility and how important the body is to one’s intelligibility.

Physiological changes would have occurred in the people who witnessed the deviant performance. Their breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure would have climbed. They would have started to sweat. Hormones would have been released causing feelings of distress and anxiety. As Coates mentions, one’s physiology begins to react before one becomes completely cognitively aware of the situation to which one is reacting. The audience’s physical responses of abjection demonstrate this point clearly. The audience’s very physiology reacted to the perceived incongruity and unintelligibility before the audience could have consciously understood in propositional terms the exact meaning of the salute. As Art Simburg, a former San Jose State student, explains in Black Power Salute, it was not until after the anthem was over “you heard a huge murmur […] trying to kind of [figure out] what did this all mean” (Small 37:30).
The audience’s reaction is a case study in abjection. Barry Davies, an Olympic broadcaster at the time, recalls “an awful lot of people looked upon their protest as being something quite disgusting.” Carlos recalls during an interview with the BBC that before the anthem was even over people began to boo, throw things, and spit (2:00). These expulsions of the self expressed the crowd’s inability to accept the performance as intelligible. In anticipation of abjection, Smith recalls being on the podium “waiting for someone to throw shit at me or shoot me” (249). Amongst those who supported the movement and witnessed the performance physiological changes would likely have occurred because the situation was novel for them too. Also, supporters would have been acutely aware that the performance would most likely prompt violent reactions from people who did not understand. As a result, the bodies of the supporters would have physically prepared for harassment and threats.

After considering the bodily basis of manifestation of rejection of those who would make novel claims to personhood, it is evident that those whose performances of personhood are deviant and defiant cannot simply demand that people need to cognitively reevaluate background expectations and assumptions. These background assumptions are implicit and assumed to be part of the natural world order. Thus, before things are propositionally understood the claim must be expressed differently. The performance communicated without words and communicated beyond language barriers and did so on an international scale. The potential for progressive change lies in the relationship between the potential changes carried in certain contexts by bodies like Smith and Carlos (and Jazz and Young) and in the bodies of those who witness their deviant, proud, and defiant performances and react with uncontrollable physical responses before the performance’s meaning is propositionally understood. However, over time and repeated exposure to the less than intelligible claim, people begin, as Shotwell notes, to intellectually
collaborate to bring emotions into propositional and political terms. The intelligibility of the claim begins to increase and people begin to understand the need to rework their conceptions of social categories and body politics. Socio-political change slowly takes place; what bodies mean fundamentally shifts.

Summary

Considering the bodily reactions that people experience and perform is important because it reveals a dimension of the difficulty and potential for socio-political change. People often fear novelty and unintelligibility even if they cannot necessarily express it in propositional terms immediately. Hence, deviant performers who desire to alter what the background assumes to be intelligible are up against bodies that will, often uncontrollably, manifest physical rejection and abjection. But, deviant performers are also up against the challenge of putting the potentially propositional in propositional terms that people can digest. Performances are crucial to the beginning stages of communicating the potentially propositional. As time passes and people repeatedly perform, discuss, debate, and pool intellectual resources the potentially propositional can be put in propositional terms. As a result, people begin to evaluate performances and unintelligibility more critically. The previous confusion and sense of mismatch and unintelligibility dissipate.

The example of the Olympic Project for Human Rights reinforces my claim about how central the body is to perceived intelligibility. A performance’s degree of intelligibility is interpreted against the cultural meaning of the performer’s body and cultural expectations about the performer’s body. Furthermore, the salute supports my suggestion that what the body means and communicates nonverbally can sometimes communicate what could not have been
communicated otherwise. At the time, people did not understand the salute immediately. Many people physically reacted and responded to the salute as if it were a threat. There was a great sense of confusion due to its unintelligible nature. Nevertheless, Smith and Carlos transformed an athletic stage into an international political stage and effectively influenced millions of people with one silent gesture. In more general terms, the body can aid in bringing the potentially propositional into propositionally understanding. Body politics can shift, discriminatory background assumptions can be exposed and, over time, more respect can be given to people because of courageous performers.
Allwood, Jens. “Bodily Communication Dimensions of Expression and Content.”


Battle, Belle. “It’s a Boy! Couple Reveal Sex of their ‘Gender Neutral’ Kid After Five Years.”


Keller, Susan Etta. “Crisis of Authority: Medical Rhetoric and Transsexual Identity.” *Yale*


