

The Miley Cut: Hair and Gender Performativity
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“Amongst the male members of the family, hair ‘somehow’ always appeared in association with sexuality; allusions were made and suppositions expressed as to the hidden feminine qualities (passion, seductiveness) which were seen to be expressed in hair. Hair could be provocative, it was seen to act as a signal. It was within this sexist discourse of masculinity that it was possible for my brothers to manufacture the notions of the wicked woman as sexually attractive, by producing their own sister as a girl who was pure.” (Lang, 1983, p.105).

Our hair is endlessly fussed over, fretted about, never doing what we want it to, thinning out and (often) disappearing in our older years. It’s dead by the time it sprouts from our scalp, pliable material to be dyed, combed, cut and shaped. Whether missing or flowing abundantly, it announces who we are, like a particular gait or voice. It exists somewhere between fashion statement and biological reality: whether we style it or cut it off, have thick locks or are completely bald, we must do something with it and consider its intentions, its proclivities.

My daughter is 12 years old. For the past year, she has taken to a particular way of styling her hair, what’s become known as the Miley Cyrus haircut, made famous by the American pop singer: shaved on the sides, short and slicked back on top, masculine and sleek like a futuristic ‘30s gangster. To this, my daughter also adds rainbow-coloured highlights streaked through her blonde hair. It represents some of the typical signifiers assigned to what some call a “lesbian haircut” – short and somewhat masculine; the rainbow hues add further scrutiny. It stands out from her other classmates, whose hair is cut more conservatively, something she has paid for, socially. As Ursel Lang writes, “For

girls, the years before school represent a period of grace in which they are permitted to be little and sweet. With the entry into education, family and school begin to work together to establish work and play as opposites. The serious business of life is posed from an early age in contrast to the 'unseriousness' of infancy. The introductory stage of our integration into 'working life' is marked by a change of clothing and hair style. The frivolous toddler is replaced by the sensible young girl" (1983, p.93). Pony- and pigtails are sensible; a mushroom cut is innocuous. The ideal cut, here, is one that maintains anonymity, safety, and femininity.

While my daughter loves how her hair looks, and the freedom afforded in styling it how she chooses, both boys and girls at her school have told her she has "dyke hair" and ask her if she's a slut or a lesbian. "While on the one hand we ourselves demonstrate assent to our rejection of the dominant order through out hair, the agents of domination on the other hand intervene in the order of hair adopted by those they see as deviant, through a process of marking and marginalization" (Lang, 1983, p.111). Whether over or under the skin, "our bodies physically imbibe culture" – public performance necessitates a physical representation, something to critique, judge, and act on (Fausto-Sterling, 2005, para.8). From my daughter's recitation of these prejudicial remarks, you can hear the fascination with (and punishment of) transgression, already presenting in children parroting words and vague, ill-defined definitions of things they do not yet fully understand.

As Judith Butler writes,

“The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities. But the relation between the ‘imitation’ and the ‘original’ is, I think, more complicated than that critique generally allows. Moreover, it gives us a clue to the way in which the relationship between primary identification – that is, the original meanings accorded to gender – and subsequent gender experience might be reframed” (1990, p. 331).

Gender as performance: it’s all the more interesting to me, as, at this point in time, my daughter doesn’t call herself gay, straight, or anything else. Her feelings regarding attraction and identity, as she describes them, feel alternately nebulous and non-existent at this point in her early adolescence. However, she is aware of how her hair presents herself to her classmates and the world outside the classroom, but as yet does not express feelings for or self-identify with any particular gender. Both she and her peers are aware of the performance before it has concretized itself into a codified meaning.

Miley Cyrus, until 2012, was known as the preteen star of *Hannah Montana*, a Disney-lite show about a young pop star dealing with the twin pressures of fame and family. It was innocuous and wholly inoffensive, playing to Cyrus’s then-burgeoning career as a musician. (Her father, honky-tonk country singer Billy Ray Cyrus, acted as her manager on and off the show.) The show was wildly popular with preteen girls and their parents until age and commercial

practicalities took it off the air, creating space for the next step in Cyrus's pop career.

The debut of her album *Bangerz* in 2013 came with a whole new look, leading with her haircut, which, along with the video for the single "Wrecking Ball" featuring the nude singer swinging from, yes, a wrecking ball, and controversy over her "twerking" at the 2013 MTV Music Awards, became the key evidence the public needed to take her from wholesome child star to corrupting and corrupted teenage deviant. Whole web articles, like the MTV article "Miley Cyrus' Hair Evolution in 23 Photos", featuring big and glossy close-ups of the pop star, are devoted to tracing the evolution of her hair from posh to punk, wholesome to dangerous.

As Germaine Greer points out, "...the more clothes women are allowed to take off, the more hair they must take off" (1970, p.43). Though the hair in question wasn't pubic hair, the notion held, and her cut quickly became associated with stereotypes of salacious and slutty gay sexuality, with social media labeling her a lesbian. Cyrus says she didn't mind: "Everyone said I was a lesbian but I'm like, 'Being a lesbian isn't a bad thing. So if you think I look [like] a lesbian, I'm not offended. You can call me much worse.' I've been called much worse. Being a lesbian is a compliment more than what else they call me" (2013, paragraph 2).

Cyrus then goes on to undercut her argument by describing her appearance in men's magazines tailored to heteronormative conceptions of

beauty and desire. It was in everyone's best interest if her performance was dismissed commercially; as Foucault writes, "[If] nature, through its fantasies or accidents, might 'deceive' the observer and hide the true sex for a time, individuals might also very well be suspected of dissembling their inmost knowledge of their true sex and of profiting from certain anatomical oddities in order to make use of their bodies as if they belonged to the other sex" (1980, p.ix). Take the challenge too far, and one must contend with the performance at the risk of commercial interests; "In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990, 331). Cisgender male magazines are interested in lesbian sexuality only to the degree that it fuels heterosexual fantasies. (From de Beauvoir: "The goal of the fashion to which she is in thrall is not to reveal her as an autonomous individual but, on the contrary, to cut her from her transcendence so as to offer her as a prey to male desires: fashion does not serve to fulfill her projects but on the contrary to thwart them," 1949, p. 572). Cyrus's hair became identified with a hyper-aggressive sexuality, drawing the ire of those who considered her a dangerous caricature of prepubescent sexual abandon; "If the body is synecdochal for the social system per se or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment" (Butler, 1990, p.328). Her hair's cool, angular nature, short, slick and sleekly

masculine, reflected a flirtation with queer sexuality, and not the usual connotations of femininity. As Greer further points out, "In the popular imagination hairiness is like furriness, an index of bestiality, and as such an indication of aggressive sexuality" (1970, p.43). Like Judith Butler's characteristic slicked back grey hair, Cyrus's cut eschewed typical signifiers of gentle, enveloping femininity. Rather than engage with the gender performative aspect of her image, social media led the slut shaming charge, as unlikely a corollary to Socrates's youth corrupting cult figure as one could imagine.

The ire caused by a not-so-simple hair cut exposed notions of what our hair says about us, and as a site of gender performativity. "It is not only in fairytales (Rapunzel, Snow White) that the seductive power of hair is evoked, nor is it celebrated only sagas (the tale of the Loreley). In popular wisdom too, hair appears as something at once desirable and dangerous, as something magical and mystically powerful" (Lang, 1983, p.103). Cyrus's futuristic lesbian cut became part of a commercial transaction between celebrity, queer culture, and aggressive and confident sexuality. The predatory nature of media scrutiny maintained Cyrus's status as commercial object writ large, per de Beauvoir: "She becomes an object; and she grasps herself as object; she is surprised to discover this new aspect of her being: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with her self, here she is existing outside of her self" (1949, p.349). She was labeled a corrupted slut, and for a few months in 2013, the public was easily duped into mistaking commerce for transgression, leaving

those outside the borders of social media, fame, and wealth to wrestle with its implications, “the shift from raw sensual coveting to elevated spiritual longing” (Zizek, 1994, p.89).

Hair, on our head or body, thick and dark or invisible and bald, carries different meanings. Our hair (and its absence) has evolved with us over the millennia, connected to the very roots of our being, those unassailable parts that create a human body – bones, organs, skin – that compose the human animal. Like DNA, it works as a historical marker: Harvard University biologist Daniel E. Lieberman, in his book *The Story of the Human Body: Evolution, Health, and Disease*, describes how “one gene variant that evolved in Asia near the end of the Ice Age, [caused] East Asians and Native Americans to have thicker hair and more sweat glands” (2013, p.161). In the *Old Testament*, Samson loses his strength after Delilah cuts his flowing locks off. One of the common side effects of chemotherapy is the loss of hair, and with it, self-esteem regarding strength and vitality; occultist Victor Crowley always made sure to destroy his hair clippings for fear that “they are still magically linked with your body and whatever is done to them will affect you” (Cavendish, 1967, p.17) Hair turns us on, yet, “at the same time, the most strenuous efforts are made in reality to nullify this power of attraction. Even today, many nuns for example still cover their hair with a veil, the form of which often recalls long, tumbling hair. In Islamic countries, debates are taking place as to whether women should wear either the veil or headscarves, which allow only the husband the right to gaze upon a woman’s hair” (Lang,

1983, p.104). Our ideas of culture and identity are both justified, dismissed, attacked and praised by returning to our biological destinies, those beliefs and structures we didn't create but are held by. Though biology is, to a degree, fixed, it is "history [that] conditions and limits possibilities" (Butler, 1988, p.521). As Foucault writes, "Biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in the modern nations, led little by little to rejecting the idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body, and consequently to limiting the free choice of indeterminate individuals" (1980, p.viii). The concept of performance relies on the freedom of choice, both in our decisions to adopt certain cultural markers, and our reactions to them, whether that of inclusion or scorn.

Hair is shaped and defined by culture and gender. "It is not merely by its shape and colour that hair can be judged; it is considered as part of the general arrangement of the head and, indeed, of the body. It can conceal parts of the body, such as the forehead, or it can emphasize them" (Lang, 1983, p.96). Its strength resides in its pliability, revealing both our inner and outer lives, representing the human body at its most fundamentally transformative. While gender reassignment surgery and hormone replacement therapy, among other biological and medical procedures and practices, are increasingly taking us towards a post-human frontier where bodies will have the potential to become creations of the owners' design, hair remains a fundamental part of gender performance.

Judith Butler, in her theory gender performativity, says that our acts assume that gender is an immobile, internal (and eternal) thing, instead of an external thing that we can adopt and perform as we see fit. As Butler writes, gender is "identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (1988, p.519). Violence, bullying, and social forces ensure that we act as our prescribed gender. However, gender can be a source of confinement and oppression, or a place of freedom and power. The controversy sparked by Cyrus's haircut showed how pervasive these cultural forces are for anyone who challenges them, though, arguably, Cyrus had greater agency to act with and beyond these controversies with her wealth and status. "That is why we rid ourselves easily enough of the idea that these are crimes, but less easily of the suspicion that they are fictions which, whether involuntary or self-indulgent, are useless, and which it would be better to dispel" (Foucault, 1980, p.x). If, as Butler says, "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time," the media acted in speeding up the cultural transaction (1988, p523). It didn't take a scholarly text, protest or individual challenging his classmates for a radical haircut to challenge gender performance, but a few months of Internet exposure and largely vapid cultural commentary.

For many, it was Cyrus's transgression of youthful sexuality that proved to be the real sticking point. Though cynics dismissed her appearance and sexually charged acts as commercially driven and designed to create controversy (and sales), the dialogue around Cyrus's new image took on more ugly implications.

“For the girl it is a different matter: she has to arrive at the feminine posture of passivity and sexlessness” (Greer, 1970, p.96). Slut shaming (attacking women for being sexually empowered) became a part of the cultural dialogue, attendant with other female pop artists like Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, and Nicki Minaj, whose confident and youthful sexuality drew horror and condemnation from the public. By announcing her sexuality, as a rich and famous role model for teenage girls, she broke the gender contract that prizes stereotypes of female virginity and submissiveness: “Girls from bourgeois families have to learn at an early age to be something special. Later, when they enter the marriage market, their innocence will be much sought after; it is the source of their value” (Lang, 1983, p.97). While her wealth and celebrity afforded her a certain status, it was only after she had reached early adulthood and took a more affirmed approach to her look and career that the public attacked her: we were happy to celebrate her success as long as she never grew up and stepped out of prepubescent sexuality.

Cyrus’s hair showed that the body could transcend itself both physically and culturally with the collusion of the media. As Georges Bataille points out, subversive practices are always capable of absorption into the so-called mainstream: “There exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed” (1962, p.63). Her hair represented, culturally, what Slavoj Zizek described as “the logic of courtly love and of sublimation at its purest: some common, everyday object or act becomes

inaccessible or impossible to accomplish once it finds itself in the position of the Thing – although the thing should be easily within reach, the entire universe has somehow been adjusted to produce, again and again, an unfathomable contingency blocking access to the object” (1994, p.94). The brief media circus wanted her both ways: object of desire and calculating villain, her queering of gender performance tantalizing and kept safely in the confines of digital media. We couldn’t admit that Cyrus was free to do what she wanted, and that we desired what she had to offer. Though she was free to explain away or abandon her performance, it was given freely to others as an additional tool in the actors’ kit:

“At issue is not a movement bent on pushing rude sex back into some obscure and inaccessible region, but on the contrary, a process that spreads it over the surface of things and bodies, arouses it, draws it out and bids it speak, implants it in reality and enjoins it to tell the truth: an entire glittering sexual array, reflected in a myriad of discourses, the obstination of powers, and the interplay of knowledge and pleasure” (Foucault, 1978, p.72).

What was a marker drawing accusations of lesbianism then had the potential to have a negating effect. Those calling Cyrus a lesbian sought to discredit and excluder her from what Cheshire Calhoun calls the “feminist frame,” castigating her sexuality by calling her “out”, so to speak (1995, p.7). Her boundary pushing made us uncomfortable, but the flirtation with challenging heternormative conceptions of image put us over the edge.

If performative practices, such as shorter hair, a more masculine gait and wardrobe, are adopted by cisgender individuals, given further agency (if not

legitimacy) by celebrities, does this threaten to negate lesbian performative identities? Butler's discussion of precarity suggests that this is a possibility. Indeed, the cultural complex surrounding Cyrus's celebrity made it easier to eventually rely on discussions of aesthetic purity regarding her hair, implications of gender performance and queer identity easily subsumed or jettisoned after the culture at large no longer wanted to wrestle with its implications. As Susan Sontag correctly pointed out, "To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free – as opposed to rote – human response. Nothing is more decisive" (1966, p.276). Once the most common and safest dialogues had absorbed the implications of Cyrus's hair, it ceased to be transgressive. As an imaginary figure, her actions always remain on the side of the ineffable; unlike the young queer teenager given a verbal or physical lashing for mimicking her hair, Cyrus always remains on the side of the safe, the world of the virtual. It becomes left to others to wrestle with the fallout. It's a performance quickly adopted and dropped; though de Beauvoir fails to discuss the other causes and benefits of performativity, she realizes its commercial implications, passing and flirting with identity though failing to fully embrace it: "If many lesbians dress in a masculine way, it is not only out of imitation of males and defiance of society: they do not need the caresses of velvet and satin, because they grasp such passive qualities on a feminine body" (1949, p.572.)

As Butler discusses, it's this precarity that is the real challenge, and often the real danger, the linkages between Cyrus's MTV appearance and a news

clipping about harassment and death. Precarity, as Butler defines it, is “politically-induced... Indeed, if an individual suffers punitive measures for behaving in a particular way, then they have failed at something, regardless of the reasons why they were punished. For a dialogue on gender to exist, “social action requires a performance which is repeated” (1988, p.526). As Butler shows, treating people based on the success of their gender performance neatly divides groups into those who have worth and those that do not: “Indeed, there is no reproduction of the social world that is not at the same time a reproduction of those norms that govern the intelligibility of the body in space and time” (2009, p.x).

There are some potential benefits, however. In discussing the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Butler describes this advantage:

“Merleau-Ponty maintains not only that the body is an historical idea but a set of possibilities to be continually realized. In claiming that the body is an historical idea, Merleau-Ponty means that it gains its meaning through a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world. That the body is a set of possibilities signifies (a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities. Hence, there is an agency which is understood as the process of rendering such possibilities determinate. These possibilities are necessarily constrained by available historical conventions” (1988, p.521).

There’s the rub: gender conventions and, arguably, transgressions are both constrained and defined by history. The ways in which it can be used strategically are those interstices where it plays off of, and challenges, these

possible performative aspects. Butler allows that the body exists somewhere between history and idea: "As an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention" (1988, p.521). Cyrus's hair existed between popular conceptions of the lesbian (masculine) haircut, and a marketing machine generating money from culturally historical conceptions of what "appropriate" hair for a young female pop star should be, anticipating the public's conditioned response. The public was feigning surprise and indignation, failing to engage with Cyrus's gender-challenging performance. As Butler writes, "'inner' and 'outer' constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject" (1990, p.329). They responded how they were supposed to respond; if the public hadn't responded in kind, Cyrus's hair wouldn't have been a success.

The controversy involved an extra intermediary between gender and self, "The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external... established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness" (Butler, 1990, p.329). The furor existed largely in social and cultural media, an entity collating the fears and desires of a faceless majority if, indeed, it could even be known exactly where the dialogue was situated. Does MTV News count? Then again, does a textbook collecting essays on social theory mean much either? Is the desire for the freedom to perform one's gender necessary if the public response meets or exceeds expectations? Joy and agency are, in and of themselves, worthy goals:

“Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary” (Butler, 1990, p.332).

Tired of the comments from other kids at her school, my daughter has decided to forgo the Cyrus cut, and has started to grow her hair back out. She’s still keeping the rainbow highlights.

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