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Directed Reading on Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler

I. Summary of Project

In their work, Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray have both developed strategies of resistance that involve playful and ironic repetition. In this directed reading, I investigated the similarities and differences between these two strategies (Butler's parody and Irigaray's mimicry). To do this, I read primary and secondary sources on mimicry and parody, exploring how Irigaray and Butler define these terms and comparing and contrasting how these terms relate to each other. My list of sources was partially planned before I began the project, but throughout the semester I continued to construct my reading list from new sources that I found in my research.

I began the semester reading Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Then I read a series of secondary sources on mimicry and the history of its reception by feminists within the United States. I also read several essays exploring Irigaray's style of writing and its connections to her use of mimicry. In reading these works by and on Irigaray, my goal was to clarify what was meant by the term mimicry and how it was politically subversive.

My reading of works on and by Butler were focused on clarifying what was meant by parody as well, but they also served another goal. I was interested in exploring the connections that Butler envisioned between her own work and that of Irigaray. An important part of this study was an interview with Butler in which she explored both the ways in which Irigaray influenced her work and the ways in which her work differed from Irigaray's. In addition to that interview, I read several other books and essays by Butler concerning gender performance and parody, including *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter*, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" and several other interviews.

Throughout the semester, I typed up extensive notes and created an entry for each essay in my annotated bibliography. Each annotation includes a brief summary of the article, a discussion of important themes, and a list of other sources to explore. This annotated bibliography and the notes of each article are included in this notebook. Because the goal of this project was an extended exploration of mimicry and parody, much of my time was spent researching and developing sources on the topic. Although many of these sources are included in the bibliography, some are not. The following sources were very important to my research but were not read in full or included in the bibliography.

1. Cornell, Drucilla. *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, inc, 1999 edition.

2. Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*, trans Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
3. Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978: 278-294.
4. Ebert, Teresa L. *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
5. Felman, Shoshana. *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J.L.. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.
6. Grosz, Elizabeth. "Luce Irigaray and sexual difference." In *Sexual Subversions*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989: 100-139.
7. Moi, Toril. "Patriarchal reflections: Luce Irigaray's looking-glass." In *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London: Routledge, 1985: 127-149.
8. Spivak, Gayatri. "Strategy, Identity, Writing." In *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. New York: Routledge, 1990: 35-49.

II. Summary of Findings

I spent a considerable amount of time summarizing my findings in the annotated bibliography, so this section will only offer a brief summary of the three important elements of this project: (a) What is mimicry?, (b) What is parody?, and (c) How do these two terms connect?

(1) What is mimicry?

In *Speculum*, Irigaray offers an important description of the nature and practice of mimicry:

...she has access only through mimicry... Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front. Rack it with radical convulsions, carry back, reimport, those crises that her "body" suffers in her impotence to say what disturbs her. Insist also and deliberately upon those blanks in discourse which recall the place of her exclusion and which, by their silent plasticity, ensure the cohesion, the articulation, the coherent expansion of established forms. Reinscribe them hither and thither as divergencies, otherwise and elsewhere than they are expected, in ellipses and eclipses that deconstruct the logical grid of the reader-writer, drive him out of his mind, trouble his vision to the point of incurable diplopia at least. Overthrow syntax by suspending its eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting the current, breaking the circuits, switching the connections, by modifying continuity, alternation, frequency, intensity. Make it possible for a while to predict whence, whither, when, how, why... something goes by or goes on:

will come, will spread, will reverse, will cease moving. Not by means of a growing complexity of the same, of course, but by the irruption of other circuits, by the intervention at times of short-circuits that will disperse, diffract, deflect endlessly, making energy explode sometimes, with no possibility of returning to a single origin (Speculum, 142).

In order to offer my own description of mimicry, I will critically explore several of the terms raised in Irigaray's above description.

1. "she has access only through mimicry..." According to Irigaray, women are excluded from the phallogocentric system and its discourses (like philosophy). They are not considered subjects, but only objects who serve as theæ "soil in which the logos (man) can grow" (Speculum, 162) and the "living mirror...[that] reflects the growing autonomy of the self-same [the male economy of the same]" (Speculum, 221). Women are stripped of their subjecthood and a language with which to express their outrage with the oppressive, male system. Because of this exclusion, the only way in which woman can challenge the system is from within—using the language/terms that have been forced on them and repeating them back differently.
2. "Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front. Rack it with radical convulsions..." This process of mimicry involves disrupting the phallogocentric system of discourse by placing its terms together in ways that reveal its limits and by citing it properly only to expose how improper it really is. Mimicry is the process of reflecting back the discourse but by using a distorted mirror, one that twists and contorts the words and images it reflects. Irigaray employs this method of distortion and disruption in her work within *Speculum* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*. In both cases, she uses philosophers' (Freud, Lacan, Hegel, Descartes, Plato, etc.) words against them to demonstrate the limits and biases of their male discourse.
3. "Insist also and deliberately upon those blanks in discourse which recall the place of her exclusion and which, by their silent plasticity, ensure the cohesion, the articulation, the coherent expansion of established forms." An important part of mimicry is exposing the ways in which women's role as the ground and foundation (origin) of the male economy of the same is covered over and concealed by men. Although the system is dependent on women, women are absorbed into that system and are not recognized as subjects. This absorption into the system of the same does not just prevent women from becoming subjects like men, it also suppresses the existence of a feminine language and desire. This feminine imaginary is a different type of understanding discourse and desire, one that is not predicated on a masculine imaginary, but that always exists elsewhere. In her writing, Irigaray exposes these silences by continually asking questions about them to the theorists that she is citing and reading.
4. "Overthrow syntax by suspending its eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting the current, breaking the circuits, switching the connections, by modifying continuity, alternation, frequency, intensity." Mimicry is ultimately about challenging the supremacy of the male system and its emphasis on the penis (anatomy) and the phallus (language). To this system, Irigaray offers the possibility of an "elsewhere," a feminine imaginary that is not centered on the penis or lack thereof and does not privilege any singular or fixed meanings or discourses. Irigaray

elaborates on this in *This Sex Which Is Not One* and her discussion of feminine desire in the form of the two lips and touching.

5. "Not by means of a growing complexity of the same, of course, but by the irruption of other circuits, by the intervention at times of short-circuits that will disperse, diffract, deflect endlessly, making energy explode sometimes, with no possibility of returning to a single origin." For Irigaray, mimicry is not a matter of producing a different theory of the subject, one that does a better job of explaining subjectivity. This move would eventually end up in reinforcing the system of the same. Instead, Irigaray wishes to point to other types of desire and other origins. This move would enable her to demonstrate the ways in which desire and discourse are multiple and never reducible to a single origin or way of being.

The secondary sources that I read on Irigaray emphasized the idea that mimicry is fundamentally a style of writing that Irigaray employs in order to subvert the phallogocentric system. As a style, it is a rhetorical and deliberate strategy for reading, interrogating philosophical discourses, and writing about them. In this style, Irigaray "weaves in and out of the [philosophers'] arguments" ("Romancing the Philosophers," 228) in such a way that forces her reader to experience (as opposed to merely reading about) the disruption of the system. All of these authors also emphasized that for Irigaray this strategy is only an initial phase, one that will cease to be important when we are able to articulate an alternative understanding of feminine subjectivity. Indeed, this phase of mimicry is most present in Irigaray's first two works, *Speculum* and *This Sex*. By the time she is writing *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, she has moved onto the next phase.

(b) What is Parody?

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler offers the following passage about resistance:

If there is no radical repudiation of a culturally constructed sexuality, what is left is the question of how to acknowledge and "do" the construction one is invariably in. Are there forms of repetition that do not constitute a simple imitation, reproduction, and, hence, consolidation of the law?...The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories (*Gender Trouble*, 31).

Through a close reading, this passage can provide us with a good description of what is meant by parody.

1. "culturally constructed sexuality..." According to Butler, there is no Truth to gender; it is a compelling illusion that is predicated on a rigid system that requires a very specific connection between sex (male=penis, female=vagina), gender (male=man, female=woman) and desire (men desire women, women desire men). What is understood to be "natural" is actually "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble*, 33). In other words, individuals are not born as women or men, they become their gender

and sex through the repeated performance of certain, appropriately gendered (sexed and sexually oriented) acts. In this way, sex is a particular type of social construction.

2. “no radical repudiation...” According to Butler, we are never able to step outside of the gender system and are compelled to cite and repeat gender norms in order to have social recognition and existence. Because of this, our ability to perform gender differently cannot be understood as any grand refusal or pure resistance to the gender system. This inability to offer a grand refusal does not mean that we are fully trapped by gender, but that our resistance is always connected to and implicated in our performances of gender.
3. “what is left is the question of how to acknowledge and “do” the construction one is invariably in. Are there forms of repetition that do not constitute a simple imitation, reproduction, and, hence, consolidation of the law?” In order to resist the dominant system which Butler calls (among other names) the heterosexual matrix of intelligibility, we must find ways in which to “do” the construction that we are in differently. In promoting the use of parody and subversive repetition, Butler believes that we can find ways in which to improperly acknowledge and repeat the gender norms. This improper repetition can disrupt and subvert the dominant norms.
4. “The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories.” In *Gender Trouble*, Butler offers the example of drag as one way in which to improperly repeat and thereby disrupt the system. According to Butler, this disruption occurs because drag reveals the ways in which the gender system and its heterosexual matrix of intelligibility is not given or natural, but itself imitative. Butler writes, “the repetition of heterosexual constructs in nonheterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (31). In other words, when a man (drag queen) performs femininity, particularly when s/he is able to pass a woman, s/he challenges the supposedly natural link between a certain sex, gender, and desire. She makes visible, and at the same time mocks, the rules (gestures, behaviors, appearance) that dictate and produce, but not express, how gender is to be enacted/performed.

(c) How do these two terms connect?

I. Similarities

- Perhaps the most obvious similarity between mimicry and parody is the fact that both ideas promote a subversive repetition of the norms—a repeating back differently.
- Both ideas suggest that this repetition is required because resistance must come from inside the system that one is resisting.
- Both Irigaray and Butler argue that the goal of this type of resistance is to expose the system/discourse and its failure to fully establish itself; Irigaray exposes the blind spots of the discourse, while Butler exposes the mechanisms that work, but never fully succeed, in capturing individuals in the heterosexual matrix of intelligibility.
- Both thinkers are philosophers and their notions of parody and mimicry respectively rely heavily on philosophical discourses and method.
- Both thinkers have a connection to Derrida—Irigaray draws on his method and style of deconstruction and Butler draws on his rereading of Austin and speech act theory.

- Finally, Butler acknowledges a certain debt to Irigaray and is particularly appreciative of her way of “reading” those philosophers/thinkers that she was not authorized to read. She understands Irigaray to be raising an important question. “what would it mean to read from a position of radical deauthorization in order to expose the contingent authority of the text?” Reflecting on this question and the practice that it points to, Butler claims, “That struck me as a feminist critical practice, a critical reading practice that I could learn from, and from that point on...I started to read her quite thoroughly” (“The Future of Sexual Difference,” 19).

II. Differences

- Perhaps the most fundamental difference is that Irigaray envisions mimicry as an initial strategy, while Butler understands parody and the performativity that it corresponds to as the very way in which we come into existence as subjects.
- In connection with this first difference, Irigaray also understands mimicry as pointing to an elsewhere, a feminine imaginary that serves as a contrast to the male imaginary that exists as prior to the male system. In contrast, Butler does not understand parody to point to some fundamental pre-existing elsewhere. For her, there is no way for individuals to return to a different origin or a pure place outside of the system of discourses in which we exist.
- As mentioned earlier, Irigaray envisions mimicry as only an initial phase or temporary solution to the overwhelming problem of the economy of the same. Butler understands the subversion and disruption of parody and subversive performativity to be the most productive and the only way in which to resist. For her, there is no getting beyond this initial phase.
- Irigaray envisions women and the female imaginary as the outside source for resisting and disrupting the phallogocentric economy. Butler sees this as too narrow of a scope for where (and who) resistance will come from. She writes: “if there is an occupation and reversal of the master’s discourse, it will come from many quarters” (*Bodies That Matter*, 52).
- According to Butler, Irigaray’s later work introduces “a certain heterosexual notion of ethical exchange” (“The Future of Sexual Difference,” 38). And, although her earlier work is more subversive, it also makes grand claims about women and the feminine. Butler writes: “The largeness and speculative character of Irigaray’s claims have always put me a bit on edge...her terms tend to mime the grandiosity of the philosophical errors that she underscores” (*Bodies That Matter*, 36).
- Butler is hesitant to fully embrace Irigaray's early work because she sees a lot of anger and aggression in Irigaray’s relationship to the philosophers/thinkers that she is reading and critiquing. In fact, Butler is unsure of how much of Irigaray’s mimicry is faithfully repeating her philosophical fathers and how much is resisting it. “Does the voice of the philosophical father echo in her, or has she occupied that voice, insinuated herself into the voice of the father? If she is “in” that voice for either reason, is she also at the same time “outside” of it” (36)?
- Finally, Butler argues that she is not willing to talk about the feminine in the way that Irigaray does. Instead, with her training in American social theory and her background in Levi-Strauss and Gayle Rubin, she believes that the notion of gender is crucial to her understanding of performativity.

III. Further Explorations

This direct reading has raised a number of interesting and important questions for me and my understanding of Irigaray and Butler. The following are only some of the questions that I would like to pursue in future research on the subject.

1. How do Irigaray's notion of mimicry and Butler's notion of parody fit into the larger context of postmodern and poststructuralist theory, feminist and otherwise? Although I was able to address this question to some extent, I would like to further explore it. In particular, I am interested in studying more of Derrida's work on play, Kafka, laughter and feminism.
2. One feminist theorist who has taken up Irigaray's work and her discussion of the imaginary is Drucilla Cornell. On several occasions Butler has mentioned how she has benefitted from Cornell's work. How does Cornell take up Irigaray's imaginary? What are the similarities between Butler's and Cornell's work? Differences?
3. As mentioned in my summary of findings section, Irigaray uses mimicry as a strategy and writing style that forces readers to experience the disruption and subversion of the system. What role does the reader play in Butler's work? If Butler uses a rhetorical strategy to disrupt the reader, how does her writing style reflect this? Does she critically mime philosophical discourse in order to expose its weaknesses or, does she do something else? How does she use language to challenge her readers?
4. How does comedy figure into each of the theories? Does Butler offer any comedy in her understanding of performativity? Is it possible to read in some humor into her work or is it all tragic?
5. In many of the works I read, primary and secondary, the idea of strategy was used. Irigaray's work is referred to as strategic essentialism and Butler suggests at the end Gender Trouble that local strategies are needed. I am interested in further exploring what is meant by this term strategy. I would like to trace it through Spivak's use of it in the interview "In a Word" and in her earlier work and through Michel Foucault and his discussion of strategies and projects in "The Subject and Power." What, for both Irigaray and Butler, does it mean to use something strategically? What are the implications of this term for politics and/or theories on agency and subjectivity?
6. I would like to do a closer reading of Shoshana Felman's book *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J.L.. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* in order to explore her discussion of humor and the seduction of Austin's speech act theory.