UN-GENDERING THE SUBJECT IN U.S. WOMEN'S EXPERIMENTAL NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing philosophical tendencies in Western culture have historically conceptualized the feminine as man's "other" —an absence, a mystery, a silent space. If a woman, fictional or otherwise, resists relegation to the realm of otherness by speaking, acting, or otherwise assuming agency, she is perceived as a subject according to the masculine model (i.e. not really a woman). Attempts to represent female subjectivity outside of this binary bind have been the ongoing work of women novelists in the twentieth century. But recent intersections between feminist and postmodern theory have brought forth a framework for re-envisioning gendered subjectivity as a constructed product of language and culture. The wide range of aesthetic and philosophical inquiry this framework invites may be evidenced by the explosion of experimental fiction produced by woman in the U.S. since 1970. This article examines five novels whose authors engage in formal/linguistic experimentation in order to explore the discursive processes through which gendered subjectivity is constructed and/or propose radical alternatives to normative Western models of gendered subjectivity: Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970), Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980), Leslie Dick's *Without Falling* (1988), Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), and Madeline Gins' *Helen Keller or Arakawa* (1994).

Most helpful to my analysis of the ways in which normative notions of gender are critiqued in these novels are Judith Butler's theories about gender, identity, and social performance. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that individuals are subject to "regulatory practices of gender formation and division" that serve to both define gender

categories and ensure that individuals behave in accordance with these definitions. In fact, the extent to which one is recognized as an individual is dependent upon the extent to which one "conform[s] to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined" (17). In Butler's more recent work, she focuses on the individual's role in this model of gender formation, arguing that gender is constructed through a series of performative acts. These repetitive, culturally-sanctioned acts, in turn, not only "produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders," but produce the illusion that these genders are fixed and natural. "The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness" ("Performative Acts" 405). The various extraordinary experiences of the female protagonists in the novels I examine here can all be understood as instances of the specific difficulties faced by women as they perform, misperform, or refuse to perform the acts that constitute femininity in Western culture.

In Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*, the protagonist, Maria Wyeth, is a film actress who is having difficulty performing the gendered roles assigned to her, both on and off the screen. She has become so alienated from the people and events in her life that she is institutionalized, and the events of the novel are narrated as a series of disjointed flashbacks from this position of alterity. But what is the source of Maria's trouble?[1] It is certainly possible to view Maria as an existential anti-hero who fails to take meaningful action in an absurd world. But her problem is not merely ontological. Didion insists that "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," yet Maria fails to construct such a narrative —a version of reality that "impos[es] [...] a narrative line upon disparate images" and thus makes sense (*White Album* 11). The reason for this failure is that both models of gendered subjectivity suggested in the novel —the Hollywood actress/object of the male gaze, and the wife/mother who realizes her "natural" role in maternity— are inconsistent with existential being. While the stories people tell themselves in order to live are inherently conservative, functioning as they do to incorporate subjects into the social fabric of the very cultures in which metanarratives —such as the story of the family— are constructed, the real story Maria tells herself in order to live is neither conservative nor coherent, but is the disjunctive and fragmented narrative of the novel itself. At its core, Maria's ontological problem rests on an underlying problem of both narrative and gender.

Maria's professional life as a model and then actress depends for its logic on the sex-gender system wherein "woman" is object, "man" is subject. Actresses and models are, after all, to be looked at in the very act of performing gender, even as the performance thereof constructs the female gender as that which is to be looked at. Maria is suitably concerned with how she is seen throughout the novel, but at the same time, she is uncomfortable with her own objectification. She begins to have trouble getting and keeping acting work, and seems more interested in finding happiness as a wife/mother, though she is having even less success in this role: her marriage is failing; her small daughter Kate is mentally ill and institutionalized; she is pregnant from an extramarital affair and when the plumbing backs up after the abortion into which her husband coerces her, she imagines "hacked pieces of human flesh" in the pipes (97).

Maria's recurring fantasies of familial bliss —in which, variously, "she and the baby and Kate were living on West Twelfth Street" with one of her old boyfriends,

"she would cook while Kate did her lessons," and her husband and Kate play with "a big plastic ball filled with confetti"— do seem to indicate that the novel endorses a conservative and essentialist view of gender in which "woman" does (or should) equal "mother." After all, Maria's hopes and dreams of requited motherhood are what keep her going and define the trajectory of the only desire that she expresses in the course of the novel. But motherhood —imbued with immanence and the repetitive act of reproduction— is as much at odds with existential being as is the object-of-the-male-gaze model of gender. Indeed, when we examine Maria's familial fantasies more closely, we find that each is somehow "off," unsatisfying. The participants are "without histories" (115) in one, and Kate always misses the ball her father throws to her in another (138). In all three, Maria's relationship to the husband/father is unimportant, and that the role is played by a different man each time suggests that he is replaceable —a stock character. What matters to Maria is Kate, and the novel begins with a statement to this effect: "I bother for Kate. What I play for here is Kate" (4).

Throughout the novel Maria suffers from separation not only from her daughter, but from her deceased mother. Her most disorienting experiences are punctuated with the desire to see or talk to her mother. At one point she relives the last day she spent with her mother, a scene which ends with Maria on an airplane bound for New York, "her mother [...] waving at the wrong window" (88). Certainly both losses —of Kate and of her mother, are connected, representing two directions of severed mother-daughter bonds for Maria. Therefore, rather than representing a notion of gender in which "woman" is reduced to her reproductive nature, motherhood in this novel becomes emblematic for the kinds of woman-centered bonds that are absent in Maria's world. Perhaps what she is longing for is sinuosity, the sort of woman's existentialism posited by Jeffner Allen in her critique of patriarchal existentialism, which she defines as "a pattern of connectedness that constitutes women's experiences of being in a world" (81). Such a pattern would both displace the familiar narratives of woman-as-mother, woman-as-object, and offer the possibility for achieving existential being.

Maria rejects these narratives of gender that would limit her subjectivity to that of a non-existent by claiming that her life does not make sense in terms of them. She makes this claim not only by retreating from the world of lived social relations altogether, but by telling an incoherent, non-narrative story represented by the form of the novel itself. Although the bulk of the story is told by a third person narrator, Didion does allow Maria first person point of view in a few places —most significantly, in the opening and closing chapters where Maria addresses us from within the institution. And the third person narrator is omniscient to Maria's internal experience. Thus, the disjunctive and non-chronological events of the novel become Maria's version of what happened. The excessive white space on the pages of the novel that at times overshadows the brief passages of text; the cinematic juxtapositions, cuts, and freeze frames that give the story a non-naturalistic, constructed feel; the understated dialogue in which subtext or what's not said becomes paramount yet elusive —all function as acts of resistance.

Although no single coherent narrative is permitted to emerge, an alternative, yet-to-be articulated narrative of the existential mother is suggested in the way that the disconnected fragments that comprise the novel tend to foreground the interrelated difficulties of gender and narrative. This is the story she tells herself in order to live

—for though she begins with the statement "I have trouble with *as it was*," it seems to be the very act of telling that enables Maria to end with a statement of existential engagement: "I know what 'nothing' means, and keep on playing" (7, 84).

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* is another novel narrated from a radically outside or exiled position: Ruth, the protagonist and teller of the tale, while not institutionalized like Didion's Maria in *Play It as It Lays*, is equally removed from the world of normal social relations by her chosen transient lifestyle. The events narrated by Ruth —of her life with her sister Lucille from the time her mother deposits them at their grandmother's house near a glacial lake in the Northwest and then drives off a cliff into the lake, to her subsequent bonding with the eccentric vagabond aunt who comes to care for the girls after the grandmother's death —might be seen to comprise a woman's version of the American identity quest. Rather than striking out into the "world" or wilderness and claiming an "authentic" selfhood by overcoming adversity and otherness there encountered, Ruth turns inward, finding her identity in the act of merging —both with other women and with the elements usually associated with alterity: darkness, water, the wilderness of the American West. Robinson's sensual and poetic language foregrounds this internal experience and effectively frees language from gendered categories of meaning even as Ruth is freed from gendered categories of being Ruth's rejection of gendered subjectivity is signaled by her separation from Lucille, and transference of that bond to Sylvie. Through the first third of the novel, Ruth describes her experiences in plural first person, explaining, "I feel no reluctance to speak of Lucille and myself almost as a single consciousness" (98). This merging of identities does not seem to present a problem for either sister until Sylvie arrives and, with her unconventional housekeeping, precipitates a more thorough transgression of boundaries between oppositions. She leaves doors and windows open, thus weakening the distinction between indoors and out, so that the domestic space —a gendered concept— is no longer a coherently gendered space. Sylvie "preferred [the house] sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude." As a result, there were "crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic. Lucille and [Ruth] stepped through the door from sheer night to sheer night" (99).

Lucille, who, unlike Ruth, "as of the common persuasion" (93), "never accepting that all our human boundaries were overrun" (115) fights back by reasserting boundaries and definitions, not only by closing doors and turning on lights, but by performing gender. Lucille marches Ruth into town "to buy setting gel and nail polish" (even though Ruth "hated these excursions"), buys fabric to make a coordinated outfit, "develop[s] a sauntering sort of walk that made her hips swing a little," attends a dance with a date, and then suddenly goes to live with the home economics teacher (121, 125, 140). "I was increasingly struck," explains Ruth, "by Lucillle's ability to look the way one was supposed to look" (121). But Ruth, "indifferent to [her] clothes and comfortable in [her] skin," does not envy her sister, does not wish "to slip across the wide frontiers into that other world, where it seemed to me then I could never wish to go. For it seemed to me that nothing I had lost, or might lose, could be found there, or, to put it another way, it seemed that something I had lost might be found in Sylvie's house" (123).

And so Ruth joins Sylvie. Even before Lucille's abandonment, Ruth "fear[s] and suspect[s] that Sylvie and [she] were of a kind" (106). Ruth stops going to school altogether, goes instead on moonlit excursions with Sylvie (once in a stolen rowboat

to an island in the lake, and once to walk across the railway bridge that spans the lake), and eventually they set the house on fire and hop a train out of town, never to return. Ruth's identification with Sylvie represents her refusal to perform gender. Significantly, as there are no male characters in the novel,[2] Ruth finds her identity (or "lack" thereof, in the conventional, acceptable sense of identity as, according to Butler, "intelligible") by merging with another woman rather than by identifying against a masculine identity (*Gender Trouble* 33). As a result, according to the logic of the novel, it is possible to claim an ungendered identity, one not precipitated by the terms of sexual difference. In fact, Ruth begins to move beyond the realm of corporeal existence altogether, describing herself as "ghostly" and "let[ting] the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in [her]skull and bowels and bones" (106, 116). If the body is the primary scene of the performance of gender, Ruth's desire to be "unhouse[d] [...] of this flesh" can certainly be seen as a desire to move beyond the terms of that performance altogether (159).

Although Ruth does seem to thus choose her transient life with Sylvie, their transience may also be seen as a form of banishment. They could not have stayed in the house in Fingerbone even if they had wanted to, for the Church ladies and the Sheriff, those arbiters of social law, had begun checking in on them, threatening "a set of punishments both obvious and indirect" such as are, according to Butler, frequently the result of "performing one's gender wrong ('Performative Acts' 412)." Although for a time, while awaiting the legal hearing that would determine Sylvie's suitability as Ruth's guardian, Sylvie "cast about constantly for ways to conform [their] lives to the expectations of others," these attempts are doomed to failure and both Ruth and Sylvie know ultimately that they have no choice other than to flee (201). Still, even if Ruth's exile from society is punishment as well as reward, the novel itself offers the nonetheless hopeful possibility that identity might be conceived of beyond the confines of the sex-gender system. For if, as Ruth observes, "things [...] are held in place, by a web of words," then things can be unhinged from their places, reconfigured, ungendered, in a web of words woven differently.

Unlike *Play It as It Lays* and *Housekeeping*, whose protagonists reject normative models of gendered subjectivity available for women and as a result end up marginalized, inhabiting "nowhere" spaces, the protagonist of Leslie Dick's *Without Falling* very self-consciously performs the acts that constitute normative femininity. Tracy is therefore not exiled or punished by her culture, yet her rewards for conforming are dubious: she feels powerless, depressed, and traumatized by performing the acts that make her not only a "woman," but an object and a victim. In form the novel is pastiche, comprised of seven titled but unnumbered (i.e. released from chronology) chapters each in a different discursive mode, including dramatic dialogue, third and first person narratives, letters, journal entries, and scholarly analysis. Even within individual chapters, different narrative threads overlay and interrupt one another. As a result, the text itself is performative, drawing attention to the ways gender has been conventionalized in narrative and discourse. For Tracy, the text also performs a kind of self-display in which she is aware of her own complicity in the production of gender and yet is unable —or unwilling— to stop it.

Yet even (or especially) when gender is fully and "correctly" performed, one can never really be a woman, because to be a woman is, in many ways, to not, therefore,

be. This basic contradiction is the subject of Dick's first chapter, a scripted dialogue between Tracy and David (lovers; he is married to someone else) in which they analyze Tracy's dream of being "completely powerless" and surrounded by "all these women who had things I don't have," women who perform gender not only correctly but happily, with babies to show for it (1-2). The discussion moves very quickly to the various male roles Tracy has performed in plays: the explorer Henry Hudson, the Prince in *Sleeping Beauty*, and Jack the Ripper. These are all powerful (masculine) roles that Tracy enjoyed playing, yet she is aware that she could never *be* any such man any more than she could be Sleeping Beauty. As David puts it: "You are both too powerful *and* castrated"(9). "It's so painful," Tracy remarks, "not being able to be a woman" (9). Yet the chapters that follow this dialogue trace her attempts to both perform gender and be, nonetheless.

Dick explores a range of acts through which gender is performed, from the rituals of heterosexual relations —including seduction, monogamy, adultery, obsession, and rejection— to childhood rituals of corporal punishment and the drama of the family. Yet the primary emphases in presenting these acts in the novel are precisely what Butler identifies as key aspects of gender performance: "the stylized repetition of acts," and that these are "specific corporeal acts" (402-403). Repeated references to knives and self-inflicted stabbings suggest that "limitless self-hatred and despair" (10) come with the territory if one is a woman: Tracy stabs her own hand with a kitchen knife (14), her sister had attempted suicide a number of times, once by making wounds that gaped, yawned, tiny mouths" with a scalpel knife (47), and when Tracy's father gives her a set of kitchen knives for Christmas, she "carefully took the largest knife, and the boning knife, back to the shop," clearly not trusting herself (106-107). Tracy associates the sexed (female) body with both illness and pleasure, so that "mutating cells border on cancer, shift, scar" in precisely the same places "where body makes pleasure, makes sex, makes love" (97). Yet she is —understandably— unable or unwilling to trace her own experience to broader cultural trends: "She placed herself on one side —on the side of illness, abortion [...] deadly deformities [...]— in order to keep *them* over there —women with husbands or fathers or babies— to sustain the fiction of a healthy, happy femininity, a feminine body undamaged" (106). But is it possible, Dick seems to ask with this novel, to be a woman and to be undamaged?

The "contradictory discourses of the body" (98) that define Tracy's experience might be traced to some of the early childhood experiences (performances) she recalls in the chapter titled, perhaps ironically, "I Don't Remember." In her examination of the "dark violence" of the family (49), preserved in fragmented memories and family anecdotes (i.e. repeated stories), Tracy returns to "scene[s] of being seen, in which the child's position is passive, ashamed, excited" (39). These scenes include receiving an injection for scarlet fever before a "fascinated public" (39) as well as numerous childhood spankings. The "exposed bottom (embarrassment), a sense of an audience (excitement), and violence (humiliation) [...] are the components of pleasure, fantasy —making up a vocabulary of sexuality" (41). "Woman" is constructed as an object by these and related repeated performances, so that as an adult, Tracy's heterosexual relationships are predicated on such things as "embarrassment and a concomitant desire to please" and "willed vulnerability" (66, 95). In other words, what makes Tracy a "woman" are the very acts that construct her as an object.

As Butler explains, "there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized 'sex' or 'gender' which gender performances ostensibly express" (411). Tracy cannot simply cease performing the acts that limit her agency and thus allow her "true" femininity to emerge. But at the same time, she feels inauthentic, as if trapped in the performance. "It was as if there was some kind of terrible echo, resonating, a ghastly repetition, or imitation" (118). *Without Falling* thus makes explicit the processes of gender formation understood as a series of repeated performative acts. If current definitions of femininity are as damaging to women as this novel suggests, it might be time to rewrite the script. Dick takes the first step by at least unhinging it from its normative narrative conventions.

Kathy Acker not only avoids normative narrative conventions, but writes what she calls "essentially non-narrative prose" ("An Interview" 89). Her work questions notions of stable gendered identity by breaking the social and literary codes that uphold these notions. She describes taboo (usually sexual) acts in taboo language, and she does so while plagiarizing most of her text from other sources. Thus, the related notions of originality and authorship (inextricably bound up with the concept of identity/individuality) are called into question right along with guidelines enforcing "correct" gender performance. Most of Acker's early works operate by deconstructing canonical male texts, but *Empire of the Senseless* marks a turning point for Acker. Although she still plagiarizes (her sources include William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, Genet, Freud, and *Huckleberry Finn*), her method here is "constructive: she maintains more conscious control over the material and the direction of the work." The novel, set in Paris following an Algerian revolution, is narrated by two terrorists: Abhor ("female," part robot, part black human) and Thivai ("male," a pirate) Although set in the future, the novel offers a critique of contemporary Western culture, which Acker perceives to be "constructed according to the myth of the central phallus" ("A Conversation" 17), and thus responsible for definitions of gender and identity that serve to perpetuate the patriarchy rather than empower the individuals who live under its oppressive rule.

In the first of the three major sections that comprise *Empire*, "Elegy for the World of the Fathers," Acker tries to "kill the father on every level" ("A Conversation" 17). On one level, the father is Abhor's "Daddy," and on another, the patriarchal world of multinationals, ruled by the phallus, which Daddy represents ("interpersonal power in this world means corporate power" (83)). Following the initial rape which commences Abhor's incestuous relationship with her father, she notes that "Part of me wanted him and part of me wanted to kill him" (12). As Tracy's in *Without Falling*, Abhor's sexual/gendered identity is determined by a condition of victimhood and self-loathing at its very core (hence the character's name): she has been sexualized to want violation. So Acker advocates, by way of a code that Abhor and Thivai retrieve in an attempt to reach the "construct" named Kathy who made them, to "GET RID OF MEANING. YOUR MIND IS A NIGHTMARE THAT HAS BEEN EATING YOU: NOW EAT YOUR MIND" (38). The mind, Acker implies, has been so shaped by preestablished meanings that self-identity must come from somewhere else.

And that somewhere else is the body. Acker explains: "The Western attitude towards the body in the twentieth century has to do with the fact that when reality (or the meanings associated with reality) is up for grabs —which is one of the central

problems ever since the end of the nineteenth century —then the body becomes the only thing you can return to" Although Butler would probably disagree with Acker's implication that the body has an existence somehow prior to or beyond cultural meanings, Acker's insistence on the body as the most significant site of the performance of identity (including gender) is consistent with Butler's theories. In *Empire*, the characters perform various corporeal acts that challenge normative notions of gendered identity and the repressive society that endorses these. That these taboo acts function as a form of writing (on) the body (and thus a form of self-actualization and resistance to imposed cultural values and definitions) is emphasized by Acker's frequent references in the novel to literal acts of bodily inscription. When Agone, the sailor Abhor follows about Paris one night, gets himself tattooed, we learn of "the tattoo's magic-religious origin" and that "the power of the tattoo became intertwined with the power of those who chose to live beyond the norms of society" (140).

Although Abhor never becomes the sailor that she wants to, and doesn't get a tatoo of her own, she has the opportunity to write the body in a different way. When the CIA puts her in jail, Thivai and a gay motorcyclist named Mark with whom he has joined forces decide to leave her in prison but to teach her how to write so she can write her memoirs. They break into the prison with penknives and teach her to write with her own blood. Like getting a tattoo, this is a painful process that signifies some kind of freedom, for she promptly breaks out of prison by herself. Once out, Abhor uses her newfound writing skills to articulate in a letter to Mark a critique of patriarchal society and the way its sex-gender system limits the range of subjectivities available to women:

> The whole world is men's bloody fantasies.
> For example: Thivai decided he was going to be a pirate. Therefore: we were going to be pirates. If I didn't want to be a pirate, I had to be a victim. Because, if I didn't want to be a pirate, I was rejecting all that he is. He, then, had to make me either repent my rejection or too helpless to reject him. Then, he decided he loved me. By the time he decided that, I was in jail. (210)

But Abhor's problems and pain are not caused by men, or by how men treat women. Abhor notes that "both men and woman do evil. But this knowledge and understanding didn't help" because gender categories as well as all binaries are merely concepts created and perpetuated by the real enemy: Western thought (213). The novel ends on a hopeful note: although Abhor has not been able to get to a place not defined by the phallus, at least she "fully knew what [she] didn't want and what and whom [she] hated," and she could imagine"that, one day, maybe, there'd be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't just disgust" (227).

The world described in Madeline Gins's *Helen Keller or Arakawa* is quite beautiful —rendered so by the radical and highly inquisitive modes of apprehension explored in and by the text. The work cannot accurately be called a novel, but nor does it fit any other genre category. Gins, long-time collaborator with painter Arakawa, considers 86 of his abstract words in the book while simultaneously conducting a rigorous and playful inquiry into the nature of spacetime, perception, subjectivity, and language. Often narrated in the persona of Helen Keller, taking off from her

actual diaries, the book constantly shifts point of view, proceeding by way of monologue and dialogue among such characters as Helen, physicist Niels Bohr, an imaginary physicist/philosopher named Ivor Plenum ("plenum" refers to the notion held by Stoic philosophers that all of space is filled with matter), a beach, and Anne Sullivan (Helen's teacher). Like Acker, Gins draws on a range of printed sources, appropriating and integrating text by art critics, Zen masters, poets, philosophers and physicists. The result, a multi-dimensional , multi-disciplinary collage, presents a convincing argument against the normative modes of perception, thought, and being through which people limit their human potential.

Gins insists that perception is not merely reflective, but is the means by which we create art ("What in line draws itself along and through as line if not the perceiving of it?), the world, and ultimately ourselves (5). Helen explains, "I could not, it seems, form myself without first having formed the world" (89). In addition, our encounter with the world is not fixed in the metaphysical vacuum of phenomenology; Gins insists that "the limits of perception are not absolute but are a function of an historically determined code that can be changed" (251). Gins suggests that we can change that code, and thereby achieve "critical expansiveness," by transgressing supposed boundaries and deconstructing oppositions that reign in Western discourse and thought. The first such boundary to go is that which separates art from lived experience: "Whenever Helen Keller writes of her experiences, she invariably ends up describing an Arakawa painting" (248). Additionally, sight is not the opposite of blindness, for sight itself can limit vision, acting as a "cutting-off maneuver" (180). Helen, without sight, is allowed "the option of a wide-open focus" (272).

Gins tries to achieve such a focus in this work, where her treatment of gender is subtle, inseparable from her consideration of other related binaries such as self/other, concrete/abstract, place/no place, and thick/thin. And she acknowledges that the problem is not merely linguistic: "If it were only a question of some misappropriation of names, we could no doubt move to resolve any number of human conflicts by the mere shifting of names themselves, e.g. calling New York 'Moscow,' and vice versa. And men 'women,' women 'men.' That would certainly be a step in the 'right' direction" (62). The books' perceiving consciousness (narrator) is usually female (Helen Keller or Gins herself), but does not therefore discuss familiar women's issues or experiences, adhering instead to topics usually reserved for males. And "here begins the practicing by a blank plasticity of a guerilla epistemology," for Gins approaches these topics in radically new ways (208). For instance, she imagines voluntary action embodied as a female entity:

> Voluntar, then, is substance and sign (structure) of the voluntary. We have in her the signpost (many) leading humans to a specific scaffolding of behavior that breaks away from biological environment to new forms of culturally-based processes. As down Voluntar dives and up again each time she comes with one *signified or if* after another, a sky of an I is sketched out and the basic unit of "who" is constructed. (23)

If we voluntarily perform gender differently, we might be able to construct ourselves differently, to change the code.

The "un-gendering" in my title might seem a misnomer at first —as if a naked and neutral (essential) subject can be disrobed of its gendered (constructed) clothes and revealed in its true, unmediated splendor. I don't mean to imply that this is either possible or desirable, or that the authors of these novels would think so. Rather, taken as a group, the five works considered here make an implicit argument that it might be both possible and desirable to construct subjects outside of the terms of binary gender categories as they are established and perpetuated in Western culture. This gesture might be understood as an "un-gendering." And that these novels are "experimental" —that their authors devised other than conventional narrative/novelistic techniques with which to explore gender and related issues— is not coincidental. For if, as Butler suggests, "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in... a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" ("Performative Acts" 402), and if we might conceive of literature as one of the many arenas in which the acts that constitute gender are performed (as I do), then it follows that the repetition of received literary norms must be interrupted or broken in order to challenge the gender categories that have been defined in part by these very norms.

Notes

[1] Maria's problem has been variously treated by critics as psychological (Maria suffers from psychosis), cultural (the culture itself is ill and Maria's response is only natural), and ontological. For convincing arguments of each, respectively, see Foust, Hise, and Geherin.

[2] Elizabeth Meese argues that Robinson "thereby subvert[s] the oppositional view of seeing and understanding women only or principally in relation to men" (58).

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