

Performativity, Subjectivity and Gender – An Inquiry into the applicability of theoretical concepts to

“Muriel at Metropolitan” by Miriam Tlali

**Performativity, Subjectivity, and Gender -
An Inquiry into the applicability
of theoretical concepts to
‘MURIEL AT METROPOLITAN’
by Miriam Tlali**

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Declaration

‘I declare that “Performativity, Subjectivity and Gender – An Inquiry into the applicability of theoretical concepts to *Muriel at Metropolitan* by Miriam Tlali” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.’



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Summary & Key Terms

Summary: The dissertation presents and explores a mode of literary studies, which bypasses the question of *literary value*, and instead aims to assess how and where creative writing challenges hegemonic norms (that is, its *political value*). In so doing, it reflects on the practice of literary studies *per se*, and the mechanism(s) by which discourse can impact on subjecthood. The exploration entails the application of certain theoretical tools (concepts) in a reading of a literary work. The primary concepts employed are: performativity, subjectivity and gender. The dissertation seeks to read *Muriel at Metropolitan* (Tlali 1994) as a performative act, that is, a discursive event which re-enacts the practice of fictional writing and thereby extends (and possibly changes) the convention of creative writing. If it is true that creative writing is performative, that it partakes in the making of the individual, then it is important to study such writing in order to discover the consequences for the subject.

Key terms: Performativity, subjectivity, gender, agency, hegemonic norms, transgression, literary studies, literary value, identity as essence, identity as process, embodiment, discursivity.

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1 Introduction

[Resistance] is not always identifiable through organized movements; resistance inheres in the very gaps, fissures, and silences of hegemonic narratives. Resistance is encoded in the very practices of remembering and writing. Agency is thus figured in the minute, day-to-day practices and struggles of third world women (Mohanty 1991, p. 38).

This dissertation presents and explores a mode of literary studies, which bypasses the question of *literary* value, and instead aims to assess the degree to which hegemonic norms are resisted in fictional works. The exploration entails the application of tools (concepts) in a reading of a literary work. The object of this analysis is *Muriel at Metropolitan* by Miriam Tlali (1994). The analytical tools used are the concepts performativity, subjectivity and gender. The results of the analysis are reflected upon in the conclusion, which also reflects on the usefulness or otherwise of the mode of literary criticism applied here.

The status of literary studies as a discipline has been called into question. Rory Ryan, in his article *Executioners of mystery* (Ryan 1998, pp. 20 -

26), concludes:

Literary critics have the best of both worlds - they have disciplinarity conferred upon them while abhorring rule-governance. They have an object of study [=literariness] entirely of their own making (because they, and no-one else, confers literariness) and, if the enormous range of texts already designated “literary” does not please them, they confer the blessing on texts more to their liking (Ryan 1998, p. 25).

Literary studies is not unique in its lack of essence nor in its apparent inability to home in on a fixed range of texts appropriate to its purview; moreover, the contention that literariness, understood here as *literary* value, is the object of literary studies, is at least contestable. Other disciplines, taking as examples psychology (science of the nature, functioning, and development of the human mind), anthropology (science of human social and cultural behaviour and its development), or philosophy (love, study or pursuit of wisdom, truth, or knowledge) clearly do not enjoy a self-evident essence or identity (definitions from *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 1993). Questions posed by these disciplines such as: what is the human mind? what is culture? what is wisdom? are indisputably vexed questions. While conventions may have determined the

minimum properties of their objects, foundational principles, and the tools to be used within the practice of the discipline (the three requirements for disciplinarity listed by Ryan (1998, p. 25), it is unlikely that they enjoy a transparency not available to literary studies. Indeed, a comparison between these disciplines and literary studies as to the level of consensus and the range of approaches may reap interesting results. Without labouring the point, it is apparent from even such a cursory analysis, that literary studies is not unique in lacking a definitive and incontrovertible identity. It is not for this reason anti-disciplinary.

Regarding the requirement for disciplinarity of a field or range of objects, if we agree to delimit the terrain of the discipline to the analysis of works of the imagination alone (that is, creative or non-factual writing), the very existence and putative impact of this type of discourse warrants serious analysis. I would argue that the unity of the field of objects could be grounded in the differentiated modes of consumption and special status attributed to such cultural artefacts (that is, works of the imagination). On the requirement of disciplinarity to ‘cast its gaze [on a terrain] which has not already been claimed by some other discipline’ (Ryan 1998, p. 25). I believe that works of the imagination have conventionally constituted the terrain of literary studies in its institutionalised form. Literary studies has

traditionally claimed these objects as its primary field of study.

The argument that literary studies should be dissolved into cultural studies is exemplified in the presentation of this debate in *Literary into Cultural Studies* by Easthope (1991). According to Easthope, one of the features of the paradigm of literary studies is the canonical text (Easthope 1991, p.11), a finite list of selected ‘classics’, or what are regarded as exemplary in their literary value. According to both Ryan and Easthope, the question of deciding on the ‘literariness/ literary value’ of a particular work is a subjective cultural/ ethical judgement which ultimately cannot be decided in any objective or disinterested manner. I am in agreement with this view and the majority of what is stated in these analyses. However, I do not agree with the conclusions that literary studies is essentially undisciplined, or that dissolving literary into cultural studies is the only way to finally rid ourselves of the inherently hegemonic discourse which literary studies is purported to be.

The practice(s) of literary studies cannot be reduced to a search for literary value alone. Feminist and Marxist criticisms have approached literary works with quite different values in mind, and have constructed canons which have effected a departure from the Arnoldian concept of literary

touchstones; moreover, these approaches distinguish themselves from that of the literary value school in making explicit their cultural agendas. This dissertation seeks to read *Muriel at Metropolitan* with a view to assessing not its *literary* value, but the identification of how and where it challenges hegemonic norms (that is, its *political* value).

Readings of Miriam Tlali’s fiction have reflected a variety of approaches. A reading by Margaret Lenta aims at a nuanced Marxist-feminist reading:

My concern here is with the way in which South African women writers [in this case, Miriam Tlali and Sheila Roberts] reflect on the lives of women, and I intend to use the work of two writers, one black and one white, to suggest their sense of the needs of women in their social groups (Lenta 1992, p. 104).

Lenta sees both Tlali and Roberts as addressing class and gender inequalities in their fiction. Both writers ‘recognise their societies as corrupt patriarchies’ with Roberts reflecting feminist and Tlali reflecting womanist approaches in their criticism of men (Lenta, 1992, pp. 105-106). The boundaries on literary feminism are posed as the ‘investigation and extension of women’s experience through letters’ (ibid., p. 109), and the evaluation of the two authors is made on assumption of rapprochement

and solidarity between black and white women in overcoming social and cultural divisions and the battle against gender discrimination. The present dissertation works towards similar aims in attempting to identify instances in Tlali’s fiction where she (re-)presents a critique of oppression. However, this dissertation differs where it attempts to couch such discursive interventions in a general theory of discourse which at the same time asks questions about the practice of literary studies *per se*.

In Deirdre Byrne’s article ‘A different kind of resistance: an overview of South African black women’s writing’, Tlali’s fiction is read (together with production of other South African black women) as ‘writing as a means of self-expression under the burden of socio-economic difficulties’ (Byrne 1994, p. 22). This writing is ‘often neglected because our [South African] culture is thought to be inferior to that of the metropolis’ (ibid.). The analysis of Tlali’s fiction is perforce cursory owing to the large number of texts under review in this article, and the main thrust appears to be the figuring of her work as protest literature. The argument is cogent and in my opinion the focus on these texts is legitimate. The only observation and link which I wish to draw to this dissertation is the following: the question of the political, social or cultural value of creative writing by South African black women should be founded on evaluations

with reference points within the political, social and cultural discourses. The chimera of *literary* value, a point not explicitly taken up by Byrne, informs her apparent desire to legitimise these texts vis-à-vis a *literary* value canon (that is, a set of works thought exemplary because of inherent and universal self-referential criteria, such as ‘sublimity’ et cetera). Her statement that ‘South African writing is as valid a form of literary expression as any national literature’ (1994, p. 22) appears in this context to be a form of special pleading for the acceptance of *political* value as at least equal to *literary* value. This seems to me to be both unnecessary and disabling.

In Andrea Muhlebach’s article ‘Between the Fires: Gender and Post-Apartheid Reasoning in Two South African Novels: Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*, and Miriam Tlali’s *Muriel at Metropolitan*’, she examines the significance of the two texts in the post-apartheid era in terms of gender. Muhlebach proposes the valorisation of texts which are not merely testimonial (descriptive of the current state), but engage intellectually in a debate with ruling norms. She sees the issue of gendered race as ‘play[ing] a crucial part in the forming of radical consciousness [...] inherently imply[ing] the need for [a] future consciousness’ (Muhlebach 1997, p. 69). She concludes that the protagonists in both of

the texts under review: ‘ ... do not simply find, but intensely debate and eventually choose “a place” - an ideological stance which is necessarily associated with a specific political collectivity’ (ibid., p. 83). She closes by stating: ‘It is novels like *Muriel at Metropolitan* and *Burger’s Daughter*, which represent, to me, the voices of the future’, (ibid., p.84). In this dissertation, I bracket the question of the possible wider significance or impact of what is identified, both here and in Muhlebach’s article, as counter-hegemonic discourse. Generally, I am less optimistic than Muhlebach about the potential of such discourse to change the future, though I fully agree that texts which actively enter into a dialogue with hegemonic norms are valuable. Muhlebach focuses on the gender-race axis while this dissertation attempts to present an analytical framework for reading identity formation as a function of discourse (which includes creative writing, and focuses here also on identity, race and gender), and views counter-hegemonic discourse as a site for renegotiating identity positions (agency).

The tools used in the following reading are the terms: performativity, subjectivity and gender. It is necessary, first, to (re)define the concepts themselves, as their meanings are by no means indisputably fixed. While I will be going into some detail on what I mean by each of the three main

concepts I am employing here, owing to the limited scope of this paper, that description is not complete (in a taxonomic sense). There may be competing interpretations and modes of application. My aim here is to establish, for these narrow purposes, working interpretations in order to enable a specific analysis of *Muriel at Metropolitan*.

What follows is a brief summary of the three terms which are then dealt with in detail in the subsequent chapters. ‘Performativity’ describes the mechanism by which norms are (re)instated. Statements have material effects: in order to have power (to be effective), they must have meaning and this depends on their past use (their history). Through performativity - a process of repetition and recitation of discourse (understood broadly as the sum of all signifying acts), the significance of statements is established. The political, social, and economic consequences flowing from hegemonic norms are upheld by performative signifying practices. *Muriel at Metropolitan* is in itself a performative act: it re-enacts the practice of fictional writing and in this sense, extends its tradition. The statements which make up the text are regarded here below as individually performative, and instances are cited to reflect on the extent of the (re)enactment of received values and departures from these values.

‘Subjectivity’ describes a mode of being: the body is a vehicle for the formation of fluid identities which are the result of discursive and signifying effects. Identities are dynamic and are manifested through performance. The subject is never fully subjected, and therefore there exists a possibility to subvert power relations. The possibilities of subversion, and instances in *Muriel at Metropolitan*, are given below.

Through the performativity of ‘Gender’, oppressive gender-coded behaviours are imposed on subjects. Gender describes perhaps one of the major descriptors constituting the subjectivity of bodies. Miriam Tlali has been criticised as not being critical enough about the gender oppression in South Africa, and this view is tentatively assessed.

Discourse impacts on all aspects of our lives. This notion informs this dissertation, though it of course not possible here to fully elaborate the arguments supporting this theory. In sum, norms, crystallised primarily through discourse though also through (malleable) social practices with intelligible sign codes, determine the extant political, social and economic practices. These practices are the embodied formulations of the current norms and express the desires of the dominant perspective, which, from a vantage point of privilege, dictates the content of those norms. The

dominant perspective is usually identified as that of the Western male heterosexual, presented as axiomatically preferable to all others, thereby placing other perspectives/ interests in a referential position vis-à-vis its legitimated position.

2 Performativity

Discursive events are performative: in *Muriel at Metropolitan*, the performativity of statements can be described as affirmative and passive, that is, those which (re)assert received (traditional) values, and those which call into question the justifiability of certain values. Every text must perform (re)perform existing norms for it to be at all intelligible. The task is not to decry the normativity of texts, but both to recognise the contemporaneous conservatism/ progressiveness evident within any given text, and to assess whether we would support or criticize the values it proposes or reiterates.

J.L. Austin, in ‘How we do things with words’, proposes a theory of performativity. A combination of ontological (being) and epistemological (doing) functions, the performative *describes* and *enacts* at the same time, such as in the statement ‘I pronounce you man and wife’. He introduces the concepts illocutionary and perlocutionary statements, the former enacting what it states at the same time (synchronous), while the latter enacts later what is stated now (temporal disjunction).

Austin’s theory of performativity brings us the following important insight: discursive statements have a history, indeed, they have to have

one to be effective. To have power, that is to have meaning, they have to have a context, and their future power depends on their past use, i.e. their meanings are not temporally consistent, they may undergo change.

Judith Butler takes up this idea, and expands it considerably:

[...] when one starts to think carefully about how discourse might be said to produce a subject, it's clear that one's already talking about a certain figure or trope of production [...] performativity, and *performative speech acts* in particular - understood as those speech acts that *bring into being that which they name*. [...] Then I take a further step, through the Derridean rewriting of Austin, and suggest that *this production* actually always *happens through* a certain kind of *repetition and recitation*. [...] I guess *performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established*. (Butler in Osborne, P. & Segal, L. (eds) 1994, p. 33; emphasis added).

Hence, subjects are (re)produced through performativity, they come into being (attain ontological status) through the process of repetition and recitation. Subjects become *embodied*, receive cultural and historical significations; these significations are attached to norms which determine

the status of subjects, politically, socially and economically. Embodiment describes the state of the subject and consists in the sum of significations inscribed on the specificities of the body; these significations are acquired in the iterative process of performativity.

Embodiment can be understood as a notion subscribing to a particular understanding of the body which rejects the view that the body is a set of inherent, chiefly biological or medical, facts awaiting disclosure, and embraces a view which sees the body as a set of specificities each individually holding a certain significance relative to each other and to the body as a whole and to other bodies - a culturally and historically determined significance. How we understand our bodies and how they are understood, is culturally and historically determined.

The sexual specificity of women's bodies is interpreted as having a determining function in the status of women socially; a causal relation is posited between this specificity and social inequality and women's unequal status is therefore seen as a 'natural' inequality. The body is the screen onto which presumptions concerning social, sexual and biological roles of men and women are projected and through which these roles are lived:

... If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of

signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all [...] it is *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it claims to find prior to any and all signification (Butler 1993, p. 30, emphasis added).

In other words, the body is created and recreated continuously, the ‘origin’ receding into oblivion. Materiality and signs are bound together - the split between the signified and signifier, ontology and epistemology, is a fiction. Subjects are not necessarily sexed: they are embodied subjects. This embodiment (or embodied subjectivity) is achieved through performativity.

It is important to reiterate that, though we are embodied subjects, we are not *necessarily* gendered subjects. Regardless of the fact that most societies currently base social, political and economic organisation around gender (that is, that gender functions as a primary structuring mechanism for power relations), there are other major signifiers which also figure as structuring mechanisms. It stands to reason that there is interplay and even contradiction within systems, which may at times overlap. For example,

norms establishing gendered subjects conflicting with norms establishing economic subjects, et cetera. In India, caste has played a fundamental role as an organising principle. In South Africa, race has been a dominant category, and still is to this day though its pervasive influence has been significantly curtailed, particularly in the political domain, if not to such a great extent in the economic and social domains.

By the token that brute biological or other realities are inaccessible to us, and are intelligible for us only via signifying systems, we are continuously invented and reinvented on every side. The mechanism by means of which this occurs is that of performativity. Performativity is here understood to be the process of instantiation and re-instantiation of norms by means of repeated signifying. These signifying practices are both discursive and non-discursive signifying systems and constitute the means of which we become embodied and intelligible beings. Hence, all signifying practices can be understood as performative and must perforce continuously be re-enacted and reinterpreted to retain currency and meaning.

The concept of performativity has hence been enlarged here to include all signifying acts. Performativity describes the process by which norms become established, are maintained, and whose ontological status is

dependent on a suppression of that very historicity. Norms are constantly at risk of being destabilised by the very mechanism by which they are established: through iteration and reassertion in signifying acts. For this reason, the denial of the mechanism of performativity becomes the primary, though mostly hidden, mode of operation of hegemonic norms. It is important to note that by far the majority of such signifying acts must perforce be illocutionary, and not perlocutionary, that is, their effects can only be felt after a delay, if at all.

The effectiveness of a signifying act is by no means guaranteed. The signifying acts manifested in *Muriel at Metropolitan* might have effects, but to what extent, if at all, is not what I would be attempting to assess. What I would like to find out is whether the signifying acts represented by the text of *Muriel at Metropolitan* reiterate or subvert hegemonic norms, that is, whether this potential can be read in the signifying acts. It is not the aim here to establish whether, if subversive, a signifying act successfully recoded, or contributed towards the recoding, of a particular norm. By calling attention here to what this dissertation is *not* attempting, I am indirectly bracketing the question of the significance or impact of the challenges to norms which can be found in *Muriel at Metropolitan*. In other words, though I cannot address this aspect here, I believe that the

mere identification of such challenges is not enough: not all signifying events are equal.

I would argue that, to take the South-African Apartheid regime as an example, the purported supremacy of white races has been grounded on a wide array of political, economic and social practices. The assumptions, difficult to enumerate and many in number, bore the heavy weight of justifying a wide array of discriminating practices on bodies. The very necessity for reassertion of such assumptions, witnessed by repressive mechanisms to uphold an ‘obvious’ or ‘inevitable’ state of affairs, paradoxically revealed the assumptions underlying these norms to be neither obvious nor inevitable, and hence, in fact, performative.

As long as the norms resting on these ‘essential foundations’ are not called into question, the fact of their historicity can remain masked. Once it is revealed that there is no originary necessity, that norms must be reiterated and reinstated in order to embed and maintain their power within society, the investments of the desires of a dominant group in the structures (political, economic, social) are revealed and are up for review and even replacement by other, new conventions with different, competing investments of desires. The new conventions will seek to erase their

historical origins, founding their own transcendental signifiers to anchor their positions and ensure their consumption as ‘obvious’ and ‘inevitable’.

The ambivalence created by the ever-present possibility of misinterpretation, of slippage, in the reiteration of norms, radically introduces the possibility of their destabilisation. This is why Butler has called this ambivalence, somewhat cryptically, the site of subversion. Butler defines it as the slippage between the call of the law (interpellation) and its articulation, from which one can reveal the false claim to naturalness and originality of hegemonic norms.

In *Muriel at Metropolitan*, an instance of an iterative signifying practice buttressing racial hegemony is identified and revealed as performative, and thereby illegitimated. Describing an act typifying, in the text, the racial attitudes of representatives of the white race towards those of the non-white race (‘You respect a “white” person because he is a fellow human being and what do you get? / You always get brushed off’ 1994, p. 62), the narrator reports:

It goes something like this. You are standing next to a smartly-dressed white lady perhaps near a counter, both waiting to be served. She inadvertently drops something which you quickly rush

to pick up and hand to her. She in turn grabs it from your hands without even thanking you. She may perhaps even give you a scornful look. You see, according to her, you picked up the article because it was your duty to do so and she does not have to be grateful to you. If you were daring enough, you might perhaps ask why she does not thank you, and very likely she would throw in your face, ‘My girl, you must remember that I am white and you are black!’ (Tlali 1994, p. 62).

The example given in the text typifies a citational practice, a social practice, re-enacted certainly in countless variations, but with one clear meaning: the reiteration of a hegemonic norm anchored on a racial signifier. Here it refers specifically to a social differentiation, though one with economic and political implications too.

The injunction to remember ‘I am white and you are black’ (Tlali 1994, p. 62) clearly shows up the implied union of the ontological and epistemological dimensions. To ‘be’ black or to ‘be’ white is to ‘act’ black or ‘act’ white; ‘being’ is ‘doing’ and vice versa. The text stands in direct critical relation to the hegemonic norms which the white person is insisting should hold in this case; it can therefore be understood as an

intervention in power relations (please recall that I am bracketing the question of whether this intervention is effective or not).

This affirmative performativity is evident throughout the text. Yet, it is clear, and not a criticism, that the text aims to undermine primarily those hegemonic norms related to race. Even so, secondary resignifying strategies are at play even while there are passive performatives, that is, uncritical citations of other hegemonic norms:

As an infant, you are christened in church, brought up in a Christian home and you acquire some education. Later, as you grow older, you are joined in holy matrimony to the man or woman of your choice. Together, you in turn build a home full of hope for the future. But the truth begins to stare you in the face. Life is not what it should be. After marriage you do not live happily ever after. You shudder at the thought of bringing into this world children to be in the same unnatural plight as yourself, your parents and your grandparents before you - passing on a heritage of serfdom from one generation to another. You are not human. Everything is a mockery, (Tlali 1994, p. 126).

Here the affirmative performativity, that is, refusal of current hegemonic

norms, is borne out in the refusal of the ‘naturalness’ of the current racial regime, which the narrator characterises negatively as serfdom and as dehumanising. This refusal is supported by reference to Christian ethical codes and representations. In this passage, the passive performativity is evident in the non-critical stance vis-à-vis the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.

3 Subjectivity

[...]It is important to distinguish performance from *performativity*: the former presumes a subject, but the latter *contests the very notion of the subject*. [...] I begin with the Foucauldian premise that power works in part through *discourse* and it *works* in part *to produce and destabilise subjects*. (Butler in Osborne, Peter & Segal, Lynne 1994, p. 33; emphasis added).

The theory of performativity outlined above, contests the very existence of a subject, due to the fact that it appears to reduce the individual to a discursive or signifying effect, or set of effects. However, Butler’s theory implies the existence of a subject, and views performativity as the vehicle for the formation of identities which are, however, never permanently fixed.

Performativity for Butler is a theory of identity formation as based on a wide range of possible identifications, gender included. Her theory of performativity applies the concept of identity as process as opposed to identity as essence. In other words, Butler advances the theory that our identities are formed gradually beginning from conception and ending

with death, and rejects the notion that there are pre-natal biological properties which pre-determine what identities we will have: for Butler, identities are dynamic and are manifested through performance, or put otherwise, through enacting conventional roles (of wife, mother, son, et cetera).

Butler criticizes Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis on precisely the grounds that, according to her, it supposes identities based on the biological sex of the individual, as if it were an irreducible essence pre-determining fixed identity formations for individuals of either the male or female sex. And indeed, psychoanalysis is often cited as a discourse dependent on a hypothesis of essential identifications based on biology, to wit, the sex of the individual.

According to Freud, certain identifications are primary in forming a gendered self such as relations with the mother, and others, like relations with other people such as siblings, are secondary. The primary identifications happen first and the secondary identifications follow on from them. Thus, we gain our gender identities first and in a linear fashion. The boy identifies with one sex and the girl with the other, in both cases the opposite sex. Freud explains homosexual attraction by claiming

that when, for instance, a woman desires another woman, she really identifies with men and this is the reason she desires a woman. In the first instance, primary identifications, identities are predicated on a biological specificity. In the second instance, secondary identifications, identities are predicated on group specificities (siblings, peers, teachers et cetera).

On the other hand, its opposite, the notion of identity as process, is of course not entirely unproblematic. I believe that there is a utopianism inherent in the critique of humanism and that this is often lost sight of in the rush to condemn current norms. Behind the critique, I would aver, lies a sometimes thinly veiled hope of a new order which, the assumption seems, will be better than the assumption of fixed identities, or as Butler puts it, ‘ready-made subjects’:

If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old,(Butler 1990, p. 149).

The theory of identity as process still assumes a subject, and in my view, in Butler, a liberal humanist one. By this I mean a centring of the human

in an ontological model and applying a linear ameliorist epistemology. This results in positively reading all acts which subvert a present norm. Taking up this position presents one with a difficult choice. One may either openly promote the utopianism of an absolute pluralism, and suffer a loss of credibility as this position is ultimately untenable; or much better (because much easier to deflect criticism), one may refuse to admit that such utopianism informs your project at all, and simply make your aim the iconoclastic one of subverting current legitimised norms. Having noted these problems, for which I do not have a ready answer, I will be bracketing the question of whether subversion of some or all existing norms can be said to be right, whether ethically or otherwise. Instead, I will look only at the possibilities of subversion/ identity (re)negotiation.

In spite of its difficulties, the notion of identity as process would appear to me to be an enabling concept. It allows us to imagine the reinvention of self and it opens the possibility of de-anchoring from previous certainties of identity. Some of the most common certainties of identity, such as sex and race, have had negative political, economic and social consequences for subjects.

I believe that, enthralled in the apparent irreconcilability of the two

opposing positions of constructivism (identity as process) versus essentialism (identity as essence), we lose site of the fact that at a certain point they meet. After all, if we are determined in a constructivist model or a biological model, the end result is the same: our identities are pre-determined. Not that the difference is unimportant, but that the question of agency is fundamental.

In ‘The Psychic Life of Power’, Butler advances a theory of subject development. She notes:

‘The subject’ is sometimes bandied about as if it were interchangeable with ‘the person’ or ‘the individual’. The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the *subject*, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a *linguistic category*, a placeholder, a structure in formation [...] the subject ... emerges as a ‘site’ [which] enjoy[s] *intelligibility only* to the extent that [it] is first established *in language*. The *subject* is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the *linguistic condition of its existence and agency* (Butler 1997a; pp. 10 – 11, emphasis added).

If language (in speech and writing) is the primary medium through which intelligibility (subjecthood) is established, it is certain that non-linguistic sign systems, such as architectures or body languages, play a role too. In addition, speech/language is produced in a multiple of mediums; hence, written language is only part of a much bigger picture. In this dissertation, I will not make any assertions as to the status of *Muriel at Metropolitan* within the wide field of signifying events. I will be examining how the text can be said to be performative, and in this chapter, how this could possibly play a role in forming our subjectivity.

Muriel tells the story of her subjection to the *powers-that-were* under Apartheid of the eighties in Johannesburg. She bears witness to that subjection, and what unfolds is the story of a subject, Muriel. It is a rich picture, full of sights and sounds, of a being, the identity of which is constituted by clusters of condensed meanings woven into a tapestry of words and available to us as a paperback book with white pages with black marks on them. The constituent parts of this tapestry are a summation of discursive accounts of defeats, victories, emotions, ideas, and so on, which for present intents and purposes, are the substance of Muriel (at least that part we all have access to).

Butler interrogates Althusser’s concept of interpellation, whereby subjection is understood to be inaugurated in a primal theoretical scene:

I [...] suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ (Althusser in Rice, P. & Waugh, P. 1992, p. 60).

Butler avers that the subject hailed is not inevitably and certainly not entirely subjected by the call. Althusser’s proposition requires that the representative of the ‘Law’ (a policeman in his scene) calls an individual, significantly figured as generic to carry over the full implication of the pervasiveness of this power, calling ‘Hey you!’ In this scene, the subject presumably submits entirely to the authority of the law. However, this is clearly not the whole story. On this model, as Butler points out:

The one addressed is compelled to turn toward the law prior to any possibility of asking a set of critical questions: Who is speaking? Why should I turn around? Why should I accept the terms by which I am hailed? (Butler 1997a: 108).

The implication is that the law is not total, that it can misfire, and its purposes can be foiled, if only partially. To be sure, Muriel’s powers vis-à-vis the law are severely circumscribed. However, this subjection to greater powers is not complete, nor is it uncritical. As a discursive act, it is not insignificant that the very *powers-that-were* were not indifferent to the text; indeed, it was banned (Rive, 1994, p. 23). Minimally, this act in itself testifies to the perception on the part of ‘the law’ of the subversive possibilities of the text, and a self-testimony to the vulnerability of the dominant discourse.

Within the text itself, there are many instances of literal and figurative interpellation, which are resisted, criticised and even directly countered.

Muriel witnesses the following scene:

‘What do you want, Nanny?’

The African woman did not seem impressed [...] She replied bluntly, ‘Don’t call me Nanny. Your Nanny is looking after your kids at your home’

‘But I don’t know your name.’

‘You don’t need to know my name to speak to me. I don’t know yours either, but you wouldn’t allow me to call you Nanny, would

you?’ (Tlali 1994, p. 133).

The person hailing is a representative of the ‘law’ or hegemonic norms referenced in the passage, while the person being hailed is a subject of those norms. From the perspective of re-iteration of hegemonic norms, what we have here is an instance of citation of the power to name, to inaugurate intelligibility of the other in and on the terms of the agent which is in a relative position of power. However, this naming here is shown to be performative, that is, in a sense, it becomes unstuck. The naturalness or obviousness of (re)naming the African woman ‘nanny’ is questioned, and revealed in the dialogue to be arbitrary and therefore illegitimate. It is an instance of a signifying practice supporting a particular norm, the historicity of which practice has previously been glossed, and is here exposed as contingent and as not necessary.

As an interpellation, minimally, this exchange demonstrates that the respective positions of the speaker are relevant; that neither position is entirely subjectivised or has unquestionable authority (a power advantage is enjoyed by the white woman) and that, perhaps routinely, those hailed do not succumb entirely to the one hailing. Before coming back to this point, it is important to note that I am not elaborating a critique of

Althusser’s model here, but merely using certain aspects of it and I am doing so through the prism of Butler’s views. Althusser’s notion of Ideological State Apparatuses is particularly useful in analysing power systems; although Foucault’s model of power is more refined and detailed (and perhaps for that reason more convincing), it is more difficult to apply in analyses (however, I am implicitly applying Foucault’s model in this dissertation, particularly when I cite instances of challenges to power relations; that is, I am assuming that power is always relational). Althusser’s theory makes the very important step of bringing the battle for power out of a simplistic dichotomy of a homogenous class of victims versus visible repressive state technology (head of state, legislature, army) into the broader battleground of ideas. Foucault’s language is not as categorical, and hence more difficult to analyse, but makes the same general proposition: that power is not concentrated or vested in visible ways in a few individuals or institutions, but has multiple loci.

The point I wish to make is that *Muriel at Metropolitan* demonstrates resistances to extant powers, and in this light, the text itself could be read as instantiating a discursive interpellation of power relations. In simpler terms, what I mean by ‘instantiating a discursive intervention’ is the challenging of a norm through questioning its ontological or ‘fixed’ status

(which challenge, I believe, possibly contributes to the re-negotiation of a particular power relation or sets of relations); Tlali does this in the section quoted above when the protagonist questions the right to name the subject ‘nanny’, and disturbs the foundations of this apparently axiomatic right by revealing its arbitrariness and illegitimacy. The naming itself is not the norm. It is a signifying act, which is re-iterated, repeated again and again, until its origins are obscured, and the asymmetrical power relations between white and black women are established. It is normalized, that is, it attains ontological status, and the norm thereby renders the ‘doing’ of a nanny role equivalent to the ‘being’ a nanny/inferior subject. Of course, there are many signifying acts. These acts collectively form a practice, a practice which underwrites a norm or norms. It goes without saying that the mere pointing to this fact does not extinguish its power, and even if certain signifying acts lose currency (their meanings/ connotations, are no longer recognized/ understood) the norm is not automatically thereby overturned.

Naming clearly plays a critical role in attributing and establishing identity, or subjectivity. The immediate efficacy and efficiency of names points to the historical layering of significance and the short-circuiting of epistemological origins by the linking verb “to be”: ‘You are a nanny’, or

implied in the vocative: ‘Nanny!’ There are a large number of examples of naming in *Muriel at Metropolitan* which testify to the re-iteration of content-rich labels aimed at fixing one’s identity. Adult black men and women are routinely referred to as ‘boys’ or ‘girls’ respectively: ‘The one next to Bruce [...]. He’s the night watch-boy [...] Those mine-boys there near Adam are refusing to pay’ (Tlali 1994, p.1, emphasis added); or with the equivalent impact, just ‘you’: ‘What do *you* want, *you*, and *you*?’ (9, emphasis in original). Additionally, the social hierarchy is inscribed in the counterpart of this term ‘baas’ or ‘boss’: ‘They want repair, baas’ (9). The polite forms of address used for white customers stand in stark contrast to the impolite forms used for black customers, often taking imperative forms without a name-tag: ‘Go and wait outside’ (8).

These forms of address as well as the descriptions of impolite behaviour towards black people are directly criticised by Tlali, and there is no question of a re-inscription or valorising of these naming norms. The narrator renames as ‘men’ those designated as ‘boys’ or signals disapproval in other ways: ‘The [black] *men* hesitated’ (Tlali 1994, p. 10, emphasis added); ‘One of the *so-called* mine-boys [...] paid,’ (ibid., emphasis added). The multiple significance (political, social, economical) of the boy/ girl designations are made apparent:

... it was illegal for non-whites to strike. What we were paid, therefore, was a matter which rested almost entirely in the hands of the masters. If he ‘liked’ you and felt that you were a ‘good *boy* or *girl*’, then he paid you a little more than the others, (Tlali, 1994, p. 80, emphasis added).

Clearly, this naming practice supported a hegemonic norm with far-reaching material effects. The narration always uses proper nouns (Mr Block, Agrippa, Mrs Nel), and the chief protagonist, Muriel, calls both whites and blacks by their names, signalling a counter-narrative which subverts the derogative naming practice. In addition, the white’s knowledge of the blacks (and hence their ability and right to name) is called into question: ‘The whites [...] are ignorant of the Africans’ living conditions. This is partly due to their indifference and partly to their misconceptions’ (Tlali 1994, p. 11). This is reinforced by the aberrant case of Mrs Stein, the only white who remembers and can spell the legitimate names of the black customers, giving rise to frank astonishment:

The blacks found it unusual for a white woman to take the trouble to remember their faces and their names, and actually commit to memory the difficult spellings of all the African names, (Tlali, 1994, p. 38).

However, this seemingly positive practice is read as self-interested and as ultimately illegitimate:

Most, however, accorded the baffling memory to the fact that she was a ‘typical Boer’, and Boers, they knew, had an insatiable lust for persecuting blacks. This perfect efficiency was motivated by the unmistakable burning desire found in most Boers, that is, to sit on the necks of the blacks, (Tlali 1994: 38).

Hence, subjectivity/ identity is shown to be performative and hence, open to re-negotiation. Tlali critiques the illegitimate subordination of blacks by whites, revealed here as linked to an imposition of a subservient identity. This critique potentially destabilizes the identity norms and opens up possibilities of adjustments in power relations.

4 Gender

The oppressive imposition of gender-coded behaviours can be opposed by showing that these behaviours are conventions and that they are not universal or essential. In other words, gender identities can be subverted by exposing them as performative. Below, I show how subversion can be addressed to other identity categories such as gender, and propose how re-signifying strategies can be employed on any signifying practice. I cite certain textual examples from *Muriel at Metropolitan* in order to demonstrate the existence of passive performatives, that is, those re-iterations which support rather than subvert gender norms. However, there is evidence also in Tlali’s text of challenges to gender norms and the need for a re-assessment of the roles of black women in modern South-African society.

In Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, the author proposes that the oppressive imposition of gender coded behaviours can be opposed by showing that these behaviours are conventions and are not universal or essential, that is, they are not inevitable. The main example used by Butler to demonstrate this is drag. Drag is proposed as a counter-practice which reveals the conventionality

of gender roles. The example of drag should not be understood to be the primary, let alone the only mode, of subverting an identity:

The problem with *drag* is that I offered it as an *example of performativity*, but it has been taken up as the paradigm for performativity. [...] *I don't think that drag is a paradigm* for the subversion of gender. I don't think that if we were all more dragged out gender life would become more expansive and less restrictive. [...] It is important to understand performativity - which is distinct from performance - through the more limited notion of resignification. I'm still thinking about subversive repetition, which is a category in Gender Trouble, but *in the place of something like parody* I would now *emphasise the complex ways in which resignification works in political discourse*. (Butler in Osborne, P. & Segal, L. (eds) 1994, p. 33; emphasis added).

There are several implications of the above statement. First, gender is not the only identity which can be made the subject of re-signifying strategies; it would appear that in some cases, Butler's theory of performativity has been read as proposing interventions on the single front of gender and the focus has been on the explicit counter-practices of drag; I would propose multiple fronts, including race and creed, without limitation to other

identities. Second, related to this, while the field of signification, in its generality, may appear to be limiting from the point of view of an activist constituency which desires a specific and tangible counter-practice, such as the practice of parodic drag appears to supply, the proposal of (re)signification as a strategy opens up the field of operation for counter-strategies to all signifying practices.

Butler rejects gender as an inevitable / essential category of identity, or in any event, views it as one of many possible aspects of identity; on Freud’s model, on the other hand, gender is both inevitable and primary. Butler rejects the Freudian explanation of a differentiated sexed universe, as it does not leave any room for variation, for alternative influences on different people in different situations. For Butler our *gender is not a core aspect of our identity* but rather a performance, how we behave at different times, and one of many aspects.

Freud describes how fantasy identifications (unconscious identifications) shape our identity. When we identify with someone else, we create an internal image of that person, or more precisely, the person as we wish to see him/her, and we identify with the internalised and idealised image of that person or group. Hence, we model our self-images on the idealised

images of others rather than on the Real other. Thus, identity is modelled on a compilation of self-images based on the images of others, not real others, whatever that may be.

Gender is an identification with one sex, or one object (like the mother), and this identification is a fantasy identification. The *group of internalised images constituting this identification is not a set of properties irrevocably tied to the body and its organ configuration.*

Gender can thus be regarded as a compilation of internalised signs superimposed on the body and giving rise to one’s sense of gendered identity. Hence, gender is not a primary category, but an attribute, a set of secondary signifying effects. On my interpretation of Butler, if gender does play the single most important role in defining political, social and economic application of bodies, it is an importance which is imposed and conventional.

At first sight, the view that physical specificities (sexual organs, skin colour, physiognomy, geographical location, et cetera) do not play a role in determining identities, appears counter-intuitive. The specificity of sex, Butler would argue, is not a given. Far from denying physical specificities, the focus must remain on the predication of discourses on these

specificities. The biological specificity of a white skin does not appear to have anything to do with the practices predicated on this specificity. This particular specificity is indeed linked to the practices. However, we should be constantly aware that the categories ‘sex’ or ‘white’ are discursive and not essential, and that this link is established through performativity.

Butler has been criticised for ignoring biological constraints on bodies, particularly impregnation, viewed as a ‘fact of nature’ which no subversion of conventions can change. Her answer on this point is very insightful:

What the question [on the necessity to recognise biological constraints] does is try to make the problematic of reproduction central to the sexing of the body. But I am not sure that is, or ought to be, *what is absolutely salient or primary in the sexing of the body [is] the imposition of a norm, not a neutral description of biological constraints*. (Butler in Osborne, P. & Segal, L. 1994, pp. 33; emphasis added).

Hence, the task is to identify and then to analyse the clusters of meanings linked to a biological specificity. The aim of such an analysis is to map out the norms which are dependent on these links. Once this is achieved, oppressive practices flowing from these norms can be subverted by means

of strategies working to undermine the links by revealing them as not inevitable/ essential.

For example, with regard to women’s roles in our society, there are an abundant number of norms attached to ‘being’ a woman. In terms of political, social and economic practices, there are multiple implications for women in terms of their roles of mother, wife and custodian of the community (keeper of traditions, careworker) etc. The consequences for bodies designated as having a female gender are far reaching. The link to the grounds for these clusters of meanings, the ‘brute reality of sex’, is hardly inevitable/ essential; this is immediately apparent once we compare differing practices across various social groups. The link appears to transpose the epistemological ‘woman’ practices, the ‘doing’ of a woman, into an ontological necessity, or ‘being’ of a woman, thus cancelling from the realm of debate any discussion on the legitimacy of this role: norms are established, which cannot be questioned.

The establishment and perpetuation of such norms have been cited as issuing from the desires of patriarchy to control the production of women, particularly offspring, but also other outputs, in a technology dependent for its operation on the distinctions drawn between male and female, and

referred to as compulsory heterosexuality.

It must be pointed out that not all women are able to menstruate, not all women are even biologically female, not all of those who are both can reproduce; those that can reproduce are not fertile for the greater part of their lives. These facts further underscore the factitiousness of any links drawn between practices and biology.

Suffice to note that Butler does not deny the existence in the ‘real’ of a body, only that the categories of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are discursive constructs, and that to anchor significations on supposed essential or universal specificities is to forcefully necessitate a set of unquestionable meanings with economic, political and social implications for both women and men and people of both or neither of these two sexes.

Racist discourse, like sexist or misogynist discourse, has traditionally anchored its assumptions on the ‘brute essential reality’ of biological ‘facts’. We should recall in this context that biological specificities abound - the variety is endless. Moreover, links to ‘brute essential reality’ can be quite obscure. Take class, for example. Discourse on class has relied on a putative link to a basis in biology (hereditary characteristics), albeit not

one as physically apparent as skin colour or genital apparatus. This is borne out by the masking of its historical alignment with socio-economic hierarchies, as such categories of ‘new rich’ or ‘social climber,’ among others, testify.

While few would disagree that our identities are in fact composites of a wide array of identifications, possibly even conflicting, from gender, race to class and others, many find it difficult to accept the possibility that the range of identifications is unlimited. What stops us from including generation, religious affiliation, weight, class, sport’s club, size of one’s nose, et cetera?

If performativity is not mere repetition of non-contextualised sentences and rituals (practices), but as Butler avers, a stylised citational convention, a continual reiteration of a previous practice (without an original), and is the means through which discourse produces the phenomena of what it regulates and at the same time reproduces, then norms relating to all of these, gender, race, class, weight class, sport’s club, et cetera, are concretised through repetitive performative practices.

Is gender, predicated on sex, necessarily the main ‘specificity’ of our

bodies which determines, to a large extent if not to the exclusion of other specificities, our identities and the consequent status economically, politically and socially? I would aver that it is impossible to make conclusive statements on the primacy or otherwise of gender, race, class, creed or any other category; suffice to say that gender appears to be a major category and that there exists in most, if not all societies today a wide range of norms which determine *power relations between people designated as women and men.*

However, this does not exclude the possibility of race, in a given context, determining even to a greater extent the cluster of meanings, which accumulate around this particular specificity and which determine the fates of individuals to an even greater extent than, for example, gender. Neither does it exclude complex interaction of an array of discourses employing a variety of concepts, even a variety of interpretations of the same concept.

The analysis of identity, which a performative paradigm offers us in my interpretation, frees us from the disabling criticism of prioritising one or the other identity *to the exclusion of others.* However, it is inevitable and necessary to focus analysis on one or more aspects of identity in a

particular analysis and, through one’s choices of aspects, to exclude other aspects.

There is space for local strategies, and strategies on a range of fronts. By employing a broad understanding of Butler’s theory of performativity and Foucault’s theory of power, we are able to theorise and subsequently to embody discursive interventions on particular power relations, enabling the formulation of strategies, for example, to subvert the hegemonic norms prevailing between black and white women, or white men and white women, women of higher socio-economic classes and servants, and so on. A politics here would target putative hegemonic norms, and the existence of contingent constituencies effected by those norms; the effective disappearance of the subjugation by those norms would be witnessed by the dissolution of the constituency in question. Politics based on essential identity would be a thing of the past, replaced by the politics of an effected constituency subjugated on the basis of a biological or other specificity.

The thrust of the foregoing paragraphs raises the spectre of hierarchies of specificities or identity categories. Though I have not come across any text attempting to deal with this possibility in the practice of literary theory, it would appear self-evident, and indeed of great importance to the

understanding of texts, that we recognise that certain specificities and identity categories (and their textual representations) are of less importance than others. In an embodied critical practice, what is certainly worthy of critical pursuit is the analysis of those representations of consequence to the reader, that is, those representations which appear to reinforce or counter current interpretations/ representations of dominant identity categories. By dominant identity categories, I mean those which impact, in the local context, the economic, social and political possibilities of bodies.

In *Muriel at the Metropolitan*, norms of gender behaviour appear to remain unquestioned, as in the following passage:

Quite often, on Monday mornings, Mrs Stein would bring in samples of dishes she had prepared for her family during the weekend, neatly wrapped in spotlessly white cloths, for all of us to taste. Her embroidery, knitting, crocheting and smocking were all perfect. (Tlali 1994, p. 173).

This passage gives a sympathetic description of this catalogue of gender behaviours, and even appears to endorse them. As such, the above passage is representative of the uncritical and unquestioning attitude towards gender roles throughout the text of *Muriel at Metropolitan*. However, the acceptance of a gender role is not total.

One of the more formidable gender stereotypes, in both Western and traditional African society, is the housewife or homemaker. The practices which have accreted to this role, anchored as it has been to a sexual specificity, have had far reaching consequences for the application of women’s bodies. There is evidence in the text of a challenge to this hegemonic norm:

After being absent from work for six days because my child was ill, I experienced a wonderful feeling of satisfaction as I

approached the shop. It was like going back where I really belonged (Tlali 1994, p. 87).

The clear affirmation of her role as a working women, in spite of the significant difficulties attending the position at *Metropolitan* (as black woman in a relative position of power over black men) constitutes a challenge to this norm, even if indirect. The tension felt by the narrator as a result of the reversal of gender roles, particularly in acting out a hegemonic practice such as checking passes, is evident: ‘The men hate it when I ask to see their passes. They feel that they are being subjected to unnecessary scrutiny, and they can’t stand that from a woman!’ (Tlali 1994, p. 81). In addition, while the text does not explore or propose new role/s for black women, there is an unambiguous distancing from the nostalgia of traditions: ‘The other, a black world [...] a world in transition, irrevocably weaned from all tribal ties,’ (Tlali 1994, p. 11).

Hence, while race relations are the primary focus in *Muriel at Metropolitan*, there is a subtext of critique or at least a questioning of gender norms.

5 Conclusion

As the introductory rubric indicates, a central pre-occupation of this dissertation is the identification of modes of resistance against oppressive hegemonic norms, as well as the attempt to answer how this is achieved. The construction of identity is viewed as an ongoing process achieved through performativity, a trope describing the means through which, in signifying practices, we achieve intelligibility. This is of political import, and has consequences for the way in which creative texts are approached. The application of the body of an individual in political, social and economic practices, is a function of the truth of the ‘being’, the putative identity of each individual. Defining the boundaries of the ‘being’ dictates the limits of the ‘doing’ that a particular individual may undertake. If it is true that creative texts are performative, hence, that they partake in the making of the individual, then it is important to study them in order to discover what the consequences of their proposals are for bodies. No text, indeed, no signifying practice, is free of intended or unintended consequences, though some may simply re-iterate existing norms, while others challenge those same norms. *Muriel at Metropolitan* is such a text. The question remains: who is (re)negotiating the norms?

Central to understanding how individuals are able to open a space for the ongoing negotiation of identity, is the concept of agency.

Untethering the speech act from the sovereign subject finds an *alternative notion of agency* and, ultimately, of *responsibility*, one that more fully acknowledges the way in which the *subject is constituted* in language, how *what it creates is also what it derives from elsewhere*, (Butler 1997b, pp. 15-16; emphasis added).

In naming Muriel, the act of naming brings the subject into discursive being, that is, to all intents and purposes, it inaugurates intelligibility. Naming the acts of Muriel is coextensive with the naming of the being of Muriel. Muriel is ‘black’ or ‘woman’ only in so far as signifying systems, linguistic as well as non-linguistic, give meaning to those ‘acts’. The ideal and material systems collapse here, the epistemological and ontological merge, for to be black or to be woman can only have meaning in practices, in acts. I suggest that there exists a score or repertoire of ‘black acts’ and ‘woman acts,’ and so on, and only their iteration ensures the survival of their meanings: the very necessity to cite over and over again, radically introduces their vulnerability to reinvention. All acts therefore have a dialectical character, with the repetition of norms which they enact reinforcing the originary/ ontological claims, while at the same time

unveiling their epistemological character by exposing them as temporal.

Performativity either re-instantiates cultural, political, economic practices prior to us or it calls into question these practices. The re-instantiation hides the fiction of its transcendental origins, while disjunctions in successive citations reveal its performative character and give rise to its instability and the inherent possibility of change.

In Judith Butler’s book *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997a), two generic forms of performativity, passive and affirmative, can be delimited, which are the respective forms of passive nihilism and affirmative will to power.

Passive performativity is a melancholic refusal of identity. The subject surrenders its ability to constitute its own identity, and subjugates its will (relinquishes sovereignty) to externally imposed identities. The subject suppresses its creative potential and this suppression enters the unconscious, manifesting as melancholia and as the result of an unfulfilled desire for the other, for alterity. According to Butler, this grounds our dislike of heterogeneity and difference, and is objectivised in the manifestations of difference in others, on which we then focus our dislike.

Affirmative performativity, I would argue, is the refusal of imposed identities. The possibility of affirmative performativity is a result of the dialectic between hegemonic norms and the disjunctions, which are instantiated or arise as a result of the performative nature of these hegemonic norms.

To some, the *sovereignty* of this model is not pure, as it is not ‘internal’, that is, it does *not issue from the subject* but from ‘outside’ and only appears to issue from the ‘agent’. The agent is only partly free, and in the final analysis, we are not able finally to really ascertain which part. This objection is irrelevant, I believe. No system is total or perfectly sutured, no subject completely static and unchanging, and this is cause not for despair but for celebration. As sites on crossroads of discursivity, we have agency, albeit limited and defined by a wide if not infinite array of constraints. The task is to decide when to act, when not to act, and to stumble blindly forwards or backwards, in hope of creating a more just dispensation, whatever we may decide this actually means.

Muriel at Metropolitan indeed constitutes an instantiation of an intervention in power relations, though mainly as concerns racial relations. With regards to gender relations, it is not as interventionist as some might

wish, but as I hope to have made clear: if any discursive act focuses in its strategy on revealing the performative nature of a particular set of practices (and not all oppressive practices) and the signifier/s anchoring these practices, this cannot or should not be regarded as a failure. Indeed, the field of discourse is extremely wide, and there is a need for concerted discursive interventions on many sides and targeting an array of such anchoring signifiers.

On this preliminary assessment, *Muriel at Metropolitan* can successfully be analysed by means of an application of these concepts. Moreover, on an evaluative assessment based on a performative reading, which promotes a view favouring affirmative performativity, it can reasonably be concluded that *Muriel at Metropolitan* succeeds in making several discursive interventions. To what degree power relations and subsequent social, economic and political practices were influenced by this intervention, is not clear.

In *Archaeology of Knowledge* the following question is posed: ‘...should we dispense forever with the “oeuvre”, the “book”, or even such unities as “science” or “literature”?’ (Foucault 2001, p. 26), and the answer given is in the negative, but comes with the injunction to thoroughly interrogate

these concepts. Further on, Foucault states:

‘... in analysing discourses [...] one sees the emergence of [...] rules [which do not define] the dumb existence of a reality [...] but the ordering of objects. [...The] task consists of [...] treating discourses [...] as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’. (Foucault 2001, p. 49).

In my view, and if Foucault is right, in the final analysis it is impossible to untangle the object of study and the discourse on the object: these are, in a sense, coextensive. It is necessary first to understand this link, but as a corollary, to note that we are participating in an ultimately political process which impacts all bodies. Hence, we need continuously to reflect on what it is we think we are doing when we ‘do’ literary studies, and why we are focusing on the objects we choose.

If our intelligibility is occasioned only via language, what are the implications for literary studies? Perhaps one consequence is that, at some point, an evaluation has to be made of the relative importance of what is understood today as ‘literature’ versus other signifying practices, with the necessity of (re)interrogating the assumptions underlying the practice(s) of literary studies. In so doing, it is important not to succumb to the

temptation to overvalue imaginary writing.

In Annamarie Carusi’s article, *Literary studies today: What’s the point?* there appears to me to be an incomprehensible fear of accepting what she terms ‘the political turn’ in literary studies:

The political turn [that is, the political, ideological and cultural dimension] of literary studies has resulted in literature being treated as one cultural artefact amongst others [...]. If we accept an extreme form of the political turn, we might accept the claim that there is nothing substantial to say about literature beyond the revelation of its political, ideological and cultural effects and how these are made possible (Carusi 1998, p. 30).

This debate is presented by Carusi, but consciously not interrogated: ‘I do not wish to engage with the debate ...’ (1998, p. 30). Carusi instead concludes that ‘the political turn is to *some extent* quite correct’ and that this constitutes a ‘*starting-point* [...] to explore ways in which the study of literature contributes to the over-all ethos of the university’ (Carusi 1998, pp.30-31, emphasis added). While this dissertation has tacitly defended the role of literary studies and has criticised the view that the institution of literary studies should be dissolved into a cultural studies,

Carusi's defence appears to reflect a continued determination by aficionados to salvage *literary* value as the politically unstained sacred heart of the institution. I believe this fear is ungrounded.

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