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Liquid Wrench: Rage, Resistance, and Self-Inflicted Symbolic Violence

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Abstract

Sandra Bernhard's 1998/1999 Broadway production of *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* marks an interesting point in the evolution of her performance practices. Bernhard is identified with outrageous and threatening comic modes; in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* she relinquishes her threatening postures for a conciliatory attitude, withholds confrontation and offers confessions, and moves from comic authority toward a mainstream musical persona. Bernhard dramatizes here an enthusiastic assumption of hegemonically feminine interpellative categories. This embrace of a regulatory ideal constitutes a species of self-violating symbolic violence, a nominally self-degrading posture. Like imagined retribution, however, that production by which Bernhard very effectively implicates her spectators in her threatening mode, imagined self-violation can also usefully destabilize regulatory ideals, even as it appears to be politically complicit with them.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I

Several kinds of views have been offered within recent American cultural politics to the effect that it makes sense to throw off the shackles of the censor and return to a more immediate and direct form of discourse. Within literary and cultural studies recently, we have witnessed not merely a turn to the personal voice, but a nearly compulsory production of exorbitant affect as the sign of proof that the forces of censorship are being actively and insistently countered. That these expressions quickly become generic and predictable suggests that a more insidious form of censorship operates at the site of their production, and that the failure to approximate a putatively rule-breaking emotionality is precisely a failure to conform to certain implicit rules, ones that govern the 'liberatory' possibilities of cultural life. (Butler, *Excitable* 144)

However mobile or self-interrogating a thinking of resistance may be, it obviously cannot dispense with an interest in power. After all, to seek the place of resistance, wherever and whatever that is, is to seek the place of power, for "[w]here there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, *History* 95). And however generalized these dynamics are, they are also localized in forms, and the individual inarguably is, if not a site of originary forces, then at least a site of their re-citation and inflection. An insistent return to the person(al), then, is (whatever else it may be) symptomatic of a necessary interest in the "intention[ality]" of power relations, however that intention is (or is not) understood to be a "nonsubjective" one (Foucault, *History* 94).

Feminist comedy seems like a promising place to think about resistance and theoretical interests in intentionality, force, and effect. For comedy—be it disruptive or normative, subverting or elaborative of dominant trajectories of power—can be enabling, in the sense that, as Freud writes, it may allow a subject to "*evade restrictions*" (original emphasis) (*Jokes* 103). And feminist comedy is concerned with intent, insofar as it is, as

Goodman writes, "comedy which *purposefully* subverts traditional expectations about 'what women are' or 'should be'" (my emphasis) (Goodman 289).

In comedy, however, the mark of language's political ambitions seems indispensable. If comedy enables "the breaking of taboos; the saying of that which would not be normally said," there is also the convention that "that which women can 'get away with' in humour is allowed because it is meant to be confined to a separate sphere from the 'serious' and the 'real'" (Goodman 289). Thus, the impulse to infuse feminist comedy's politics with some worldly bite, to mark it as distinct from that *ressentiment* where "creatures to whom the real reaction, that of the deed, is denied and who find compensation in an imaginary revenge," is a natural one (Nietzsche 22). This desire to infuse with and to "find the blood" in comic discourse is part of the ethically and politically driven effort not to repeat that hegemonic (non)recognition of female subjectivity except as itself a joke (Phelan, *Mourning* 9).

If the play aspect of feminist comedy—for Freud, the "joking envelope"—is the agreeable form of its "substance," then rage very handily marks the non-comic and insistent matter of that thought (*Jokes* 92). For "[t]o be perceived as wronged, you have to be perceived as right," says Frye, and "[a]nger is always righteous" (86). In this scenario, rage usefully functions as both the condition of the joke's political nature and as a satisfactory measure of the "initiative and freedom" that often seems, both intuitively and conventionally, to constitute what force is (Foucault, *Archeology* 199). In this sense, the pugilistic posture of "outrageous" comedy, to the extent that it is seen to rupture the joking envelope, marks the very emergence of a discrete subject's palpable, intrinsically transformative power (Kahane 128). Thus, the transformative aim of a feminist joke is

imagined as harnessing or being harnessed to rage, and "women's comedy," even when it *seems* to be "gentle and conciliatory," is in fact "challenging, angry, and subversive" (Barreca, *New Perspectives* 5).

On the other hand, the air of necessity about this mark may not be borne only of the rightness of feminist rage. The necessarily marked "claim" of feminist comedy also reproduces the logic of that ideological apparatus in which "the assertion of rights and claims to entitlement can only be made on the basis of a singular and injured identity," which grants "recognition and rights to subjects totalized by the particularity that constitutes their plaintiff status" (Butler, *Psychic* 100). This is not to argue that rage is wholly an insidious hegemonic production, nor that rage is inherently *ineffective*. (Nor, in fact, is rage utterly absent in the model of comedy I propose to consider here.) Rather, I would suggest that where the trajectory of feminist comedy must be thus marked—in itself rather than in its effects, precisely in order to be effective—its potential efficacy is short-circuited by its very measure, by that measure's implicit reproduction of a hegemonic field in which "regulatory power maintains subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the demand for continuity, visibility, and place" (Butler, *Psychic* 29).

Judith Halberstam's discussion of "imagined violence" is a reconsideration of rage and representation which, for my purposes, usefully refigures the promise of "outrageous" comedy. For Halberstam, rage is key to the production of a certain imaginary site: a "political space opened up by the representation [...] of unsanctioned violences committed by subordinate groups upon powerful white men" (187). In other words, she suggests that the efficacy of a subversive (here, retributive) scene lies not in that marked content itself but in the unpredictable fantasy effects that might usefully be

provoked there. Halberstam explicitly disavows a *direct* relation between gesture and effect, and argues rather that the provocation of the fantasy of "unsanctioned eruptions from the 'wrong people'" can have usefully transformative effects (187).

Sandra Bernhard's "outrageous" comedy invokes the threat of the eruptive or confrontational other in this way, and has helped enable the "intense impression" by which, at least partly, her persona has won a certain niche and mainstream footing (Stone, "Pretty"). In this sense, Bernhard's attitude of "postmodern revolt" (Halberstam 195) seems to side-step the apparently requisite "elusive and fragile" condition of postmodern critical discourse (Auslander, *Presence* 31). An "'imagined violence' with real consequences" certainly *sounds* robust, and Bernhard's success has definitely been abetted by the allusion to, in the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions, a confrontational other as implied origin (Halberstam 190). "She's at her best when seething," remarks one reviewer. "In her own voice, unfiltered, she is a living, breathing bonfire" (Marks).

I wonder though if, in imagined violence's longing to exceed the "polite disapproval" of organized transgression (Halberstam 189), a certain logic of a visible real persists as "an unmarked conspirator" in a way that is *not* useful (Phelan, *Unmarked* 3). Insofar as its effects hinge upon its overtly oppositional posture, surely there is here a blush of investment in the very fantasy that imagined retribution exploits, in the form of its investment in the performative's very relation to material effect. I don't mean to say that such an investment would disqualify imagined violence as a useful strategy. I wonder, though, even as this strategically additive gesture enjoys the mobility of effects in a fantasy-informed field, if markedly retributive discourse might *eventually* find itself circumscribed by the very relations it exploits.

In this respect, Sandra Bernhard's 1998/1999 Broadway production of *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* is an interesting moment not only in Bernhard's career but also in that of terror tactics themselves. For although Bernhard's success has evolved mainly in the posture of the confrontational other, at this point, a reviewer of *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* notes, "Bernhard no longer needs to resort to terror tactics, and in any case they would no longer work" (Franklin 113). In other words, the moment of this technique's success in enabling a feminist player in a hegemonic field of representation seems also to be an endpoint of its efficacy *as* transgression. Thus, while imagined retributive violence is not necessarily a discursive model which "underestimates the linguistic requirements for entering sociality," it does seem that the reaches of its effects, however mobile and effective they may be, are eventually contained to the extent that they remain yoked to (by their imagined reversals in) a logic of the visible real (Butler, *Psychic* 29).

In this thesis, then, I would like to take as axiomatic that the transgressive scene which informs Sandra Bernhard's *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* is *ever* organized according to a hegemonic circuit of recognition, and to imagine that the retributive or confrontational scene functions here as a field of *compelled* eruptions which serve to re-centralize a hegemonic vanishing point of the real. This is not to discard altogether any hope of useful disruption—rather, I'd like to consider the potential effects of failures, in this particular instance, to *thus* erupt.

The model of comedy I consider here is a citation of Halberstam's imagined violence, but with a number of proposed substitutions: in the place of marked opposition, an apparent compliancy, an attitude that "[affirms] complicity as the basis of political agency"; and, rather than imagined retribution, an imagined self-violation, where

subjection and (subjective) injury are themselves "a strange kind of resource" (Butler, *Subjection 29; Excitable 38*).

This, in other words, is a joke told on oneself, but (crucially) not in the order of a self-satisfying masochistic gesture, nor as the pathos of a turn against the self as "the simplest target" (Barreca, *Last Laughs* 15). Rather, this is comedy which "requires and repeats the reactionary in order to effect a subversive reterritorialization" (Butler, *Psychic* 100). I will argue, then, that Bernhard's *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* is the performance of a "critical desubjection" (Butler, *Psychic* 130), which is remarkable in her declared relinquishing of anger, her overtly confessional "love" mode, and her "straight" (non-comic, and mainstream) musical persona, all of which flagrantly invoke hegemonic interpellative modes in a dramatization of her pursuit of a "credible" assumption of the hegemonic feminine. "A particularly favourable occasion for tendentious jokes is presented when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself," writes Freud, "or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share—a collective person, that is" (*Jokes* 111). In this instance, in other words, Bernhard's nominal treachery toward the self may work in effect as a subversive treachery toward the Subject.

Bernhard's drama of interpellation is effective in its very lack of intentional mark, and its subversion may only be marked in its effects. This self-violating joke, I will argue, is a species of theatre in which a joking subject is (comically, incompletely) precipitated, the butt of the joke exposed (that very subject, displayed as a site of loss), and the joke's audience "contaminated," insofar as the joke occasions "a circuit in which no one's identity remains uncontaminated by exposure to the Other's desire" (Flieger 945). This

thesis, then, does not work toward the eradication of rage per se, but hopes to consider a re-elaboration of affect in which "passion, injury, grief, aspiration [may] become reorganized without fixing the terms of that recognition in yet another order of lifelessness and rigid exclusion" (Butler, *Bodies* 21).

Chapter Two: Principles of Self-Violation and Self-Violating Principles

Rage, writes Judith Halberstam, after June Jordan, "is a political space opened up by [...] the representation [...] of unsanctioned violences committed by subordinate groups upon powerful white men" (187). Here, Halberstam argues, where "expression threatens to become action," the depiction of retributive violence may produce real, politically transformative effects (191). My question in this chapter is: can we speak of imagined violence and resistance only in terms of a rhetoric of retribution? Can Halberstam's theory also work in a feminist "examination of the operation of the 'grammar'" of other figures and sites of imagined violence (Irigaray, "Power" 75)?

Thermodynamics of Rage

In some ways, rage is a very attractive measure of the politically resistant gesture. Both ethically and ontologically authoritative, or "honest and genuine, as all rage is," outrage seems like a natural reference point for a feminist desire to express, to effect, to encounter—indeed, to have in the first place—a significant passion (Friedman 71). Not only may it be occasion for that "exhilarating sense of freedom which transgression affords," but also, as a superior and irreducible force, rage *works* (Stallybrass and White 201). And it works not by negotiation but directly and immediately, with "the straightforwardness of 'irritation'" (W. Kaufman 241). This rage is real, true, and dangerous.

In this context, rage is the reliable circuitry of a thermodynamic economy of resistance: "a model of energy involving tension, release and return to homostasis" (Irigaray, "Mechanics" 20). Usefully material, it erupts from and appears to guarantee at least a node of unequivocal political insistence; perhaps it even comprises "that irreducible specificity that is said to ground feminist practice" (Butler, *Bodies* 29). Thermodynamic rage shares, in its own way, Halberstam's interest in "the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions from 'the wrong people'" (199). Unlike Halberstam's place of rage, however, thermodynamic rage's "prized materiality" comes to matter in a manner which undermines its own ambitions (Butler, *Bodies* 30).

As in Stallybrass's and White's readings of the ultimately regulated and regulatory logic of carnivalesque reversals (13), and in Foucault's model of the organization of bodies and pleasures in *The History of Sexuality*, the idea that rage is a "brave but thwarted energy" suggests that the logic of eruptive rage facilitates the regulation of those very bodies which apparently seek its release and its transformative powers (Butler, *Gender* 95). In this respect, outrage is definitely political, but it is also "healthy" according to a hegemonically regulated, "calculated management of life" (Foucault, *History* 140). In other words, insofar as it operates by a reversal-proper logic of power, thermodynamic rage is an economy of "reversible transformations *in a closed circuit*" (Irigaray, "Fluids" 115); that is, its posture effectively "aim[s] simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself" (Irigaray, "Power" 81). Hegemonic configurations are most obviously reproduced here in the figure of a sovereign subject. Where Halberstam's attitude of postmodern revolt necessarily seeks political effect in the agency of a subject subject to language, naturalistic rage, in which

self-rotting rage is distinguished from an *intrinsically* transformative outrage, is the gesture of a discrete if not sovereign subject (Kahane 128).

The promise of apocalyptic (transformative) reversals of forces and fortune by way of an originary rage helps fuel, in the figure of the sovereign and a strictly oppositional power matrix, "the reproduction of the relations of production and of the relations deriving from them," or, a phallogentric economy of desire (Althusser 170). As Butler characterizes that hate speech which is invoked by the very adjudications which purport to constrain it, similarly, the freed raging body is in some contexts a "savory" production of hetero-patriarchal culture (*Excitable* 97), and constitutes "yet another incarnation of that law" it stands to subvert and transform (*Gender* 93).

There is then an imperative in resistance to resist, in addition to everything else, that sensibility which Irigaray calls (irresistibly) "a direct feminine challenge" ("Power" 76). Unlike a strictly oppositional attitude, postmodern resistance knows a certain complicity in its techniques, in the sense of its compulsory repetition of hegemonic figures of language. In subversive discourse, Butler writes, "[t]here is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there" (*Gender* 145). Indeed, "it is likely," Foucault goes so far as to say, "that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses" (*Language* 34). Politically useful transgressions, however, may be marked by the trajectory of forces in this scene—marked, in other words, not in (or only in) the gesture itself but in its effects. A nominally complicit reproduction of hegemonic figures may yet effectively trouble that limit which it crosses and into which it subsides. In the context of gender performatives, for example,

repetitions may both reproduce and usefully "[bring] into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called [...] original" (Butler, *Gender* 31).

This is resistance effected "in an asymmetrical way" (Derrida 19). For Irigaray, it is the (subversive) motion of an economy of fluids, a "dynamics of the near and not of the proper," which "is always in a relation of excess or lack vis-à-vis unity" ("Fluids" 111, 117).¹ For Halberstam, this repetition is (emphatically) queer: "[t]he excess is the disruption of identity and the violence of power and the power of representation; it is *dis-integrational*; the excess is QUEER" (193). Either way, the imperative in a postmodern attitude of revolt is not to topple but to tool around, "jamming the works of the theoretical machine" (Irigaray, "Fluids" 107). In this scene, Halberstam's rage is not (or not only) material or originary, but rather is a "location between and beyond thought, action, response, activism, protest, anger, terror, murder, and detestation" (188). This is rage as technique, which functions in a model of imagined violence as a "*catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle*" (original emphasis) (Stallybrass and White 14).

Refiguring Imagined Violence

Halberstam argues that the usefulness of imagined violence is in part borne of its never having to be "actualized;" it is effective, that is, by performative force (193).

Threat's fantasy-real is produced in and by the unpredictable relation between "imagined violence and real violence" (Halberstam 188), or, as Hart formulates, in a queer-real

¹ This is not to "put the physics back into metaphysics," Schor argues, but rather to work "the ruining of the metaphysics of being through the substitution of a physics of the liquid for a physics of the solid" (52).

"evoked precisely in the ambiguity between the 'real' and the 'performed'" ("Blood" 59). Embarking upon the sort of "insistent and intrepid disorganization" that Fuss suggests as a resistant strategy (6), imagined violence exploits the materiality of threat and fantasy and "the ways in which the phantasmic assumes the place of the real within an untheorized use of referential language" (Butler, "Force" 108).

This is not to say that working resistance through fantasy-effects means abandoning ambitions of political efficacy. Productive imagined violence is not a paralytic model; it is not (not quite) Nietzsche's *ressentiment*, where "creatures to whom the real reaction, that of the deed, is denied and who find compensation in an imaginary revenge" (22). Nor does imagined violence relinquish all affection for the real. If postmodern revolt unfolds in representation and fantasy, still, "[e]ach representation relies on and produces a specific logic of the real" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 2). Even in the logic of postmodern resistance, there is a persistent and perhaps crucial desire "to mark a stationary place, to appeal to a referent, to have recourse to a/the 'real thing'" (Hart, "Blood" 58). Even a queer-real, concedes Hart, is complicit with "the drive toward *visibility*" ("Blood" 57).

Nor then, obviously, does or should imagined violence abandon materiality: the persistence here of the desire to refer has to do with some very palpable realities, and to sift through fantasy-effects for transformative potential is yet to engage in a very material skirmish. Halberstam easily cedes that "it would only restabilize the relationship between the imagined and the real to claim that representing female violence quells male attacks" (191). However, she also insists that, if hegemony's materialities are achieved through the production and exercise of certain "specular" relations (Althusser 168), then so too

might imagined resistant violence touch upon the body in this way. In other words, if "ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices [and] [t]his existence is material," then imagined violence is not (necessarily) just shadow-boxing. This aspect of Halberstam's argument is important, because if resistance necessarily has to do with material effect, then resistance necessitates force, and in a postmodern cultural context where "[w]ords don't stick" (Pollack 73), that sovereign subject which seemed to effect so reliable a relation between language and the material is disabled, leaving a "difficult" model of language which seems not to allow for the "initiative and freedom" that seems to constitute what force is (Foucault, *Archeology* 199).

Thus, if language can't effect force in reference then it must *do*; "writing as doing displaces writing as meaning; writing becomes meaningful in the material, dis/continuous act of writing" (Pollack 75). But if it is true that "performativity *is* the postmodern condition: not simply a form of representation, it names a specific historical stratum of power/knowledge," then the necessary relation between language and the material in a performative model is itself ideological, and thus constitutes not only its force but also its very interest (McKenzie 232).² Hope in performative effect, then, in Halberstam's "'imagined violence' with real consequences" (190), alludes as much as does any other ideological desire to an "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 153). Butler too characterizes this as a fantasy relation, where, she argues, "the historical loss of the sovereign organization of power appears to occasion the fantasy of its return—a return [...] that takes place in language, in the figure of the

² McKenzie offers a useful reminder of Butler's sometimes elided "stress on performativity as both normative and punitive" (225).

performative" (*Excitable* 78). In other words, imagined violence at once produces, exploits, and participates in the very confounded distinction between reals that makes language have something to do with the material, and it is at least partly by the force of this desire that "agency [should begin] where sovereignty wanes" (Butler, *Excitable* 16).

If language is to have "the amplitude we long for," perhaps it necessarily perpetuates a certain eruptive logic in relation to the material (Blau 149). For example, with reference to Foucault's "'reverse'-discourse," in which a homosexuality begins "to speak in its own behalf" (*History* 101), Halberstam writes that queer repetition "gathers steam, acquires density until it is in excess of the category it purports to articulate" (193). And, longing for a rage that might exceed "polite disapproval," she works toward "something spontaneous, something that spills across the carefully drawn police lines, something threatening" (189). Halberstam links this threat to "the threat of the return of the repressed, an always bloody and violent re-entry into the realm of signification" (195). Unlike Phelan, however, who formulates "return" as a useful acknowledgement of "the internal/external other as always already lost," or as the return of foreclosed loss (*Unmarked* 26), Halberstam characterizes this as an implicitly additive voice that "demands to be heard" (195).

On the other hand, perhaps this persistence of the eruptive constitutes a strategic or knowing "rhetoricity" (Spivak 74), a critical miming: a reproduction of hegemonic figures that works "to disconcert the staging of representation according to exclusively 'masculine' parameters" (Irigaray, "Power" 68). If, for example, as Butler notes, Irigaray's rhetoric "tend[s] to mime the grandiosity of the philosophical errors that she underscores," Butler also instructs that Irigaray's "reenactment of philosophical errors

requires that we learn how to read her for the difference that her reading performs" (*Bodies* 36). In Halberstam's model, this difference may be read and effected in her theory's disavowal of material guarantee—"there is no direct and simple relationship between imagined violence and real effects," she writes (191)—and in its admission of and vulnerability to the same "essential drift" that it exploits, the tendency of the speech act to alter context and to exceed intent (Derrida 8).

Countering the accusation that a theory of imagined violence constitutes a male-identified or "toxic" feminism, Halberstam writes:

role reversal never simply replicates the terms of an equation. The depiction of women committing acts of violence against men does not simply use 'male' tactics of aggression for other ends; in fact, female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and it simultaneously challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity. (191)

In other words, the production of a cross-over (or, male-identified) figure is neither the problem with nor the achievement of a scene of violent reversal. Usurpation itself is not the point. The point, rather, is to display a scene of usurpation with an eye toward what its usefully "non-necessary" effects or displacements might be or do (Butler, *Excitable* 39). It is in this sense that Butler describes a scene of usurpation as where "subjects who have been excluded from enfranchisement seize the language of enfranchisement and set into motion a 'performative contradiction'" (*Excitable* 89).

The tendency of a contradictory performative to exceed intent must surely also implicate the resistant practice which exploits it; to transgress, to set the scene, or to offer the markedly subversive gesture, is not necessarily to displace (Stallybrass and White 201). To insist otherwise—that such gestures are *necessarily* effective—would be as

awkward as the assertion (which Irigaray writes against) that "one need only be a woman in order to remain outside phallic power" ("Power" 81). Butler seems to make a similar qualification in her reading of Derrida, who "appears to install the break as a structurally necessary feature of every utterance and every codifiable written mark, thus paralyzing the social analysis of forceful utterance" (*Excitable* 150).

Thus, the same performative unpredictability in which resistance finds promise also constitutes its risk, the risk of re-centralizing the limit it crosses. If hetero-patriarchal culture "persistently and ostentatiously exhibits and produces its necessary other in order to keep it under erasure" (Hart, *Fatal* ix), a putatively subversive imagined violence could work as a like elaborative "*projective map*" of the dominant imaginary (Irigaray, "Fluids" 108), which, as Stallybrass and White note, would not necessarily distress that economy (201). After all, hegemonic representation "*includes... [its object] symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life*" (Stallybrass and White 5).³

This is not at all to deny the effectiveness of Halberstam's theory, to claim that imagined violence is "simply [in an absolute sense] resorbed" in and by hegemonic functions (Irigaray, "Power" 76). It most certainly is not to argue that imagined violence is the scene of an "immoral" feminism (Halberstam 191). Nor is it to diffuse the very usefulness of a hetero-patriarchal projection that "makes manifest a masculine imaginary's reproduction of itself," thereby eroding that operation's critical invisibility (Hart, *Fatal* xi). It is to argue, rather, that if the informing ethic of Halberstam's theory is that of disrupting "the logic of represented violence" (191), then her theory should not be read as making any sort of insistence which could "prohibit the very proliferation of

³ In other words, however the retributive figure might threaten, it might also seem to fuck harder.

nominate possibilities that the undesignatable might produce" (Butler, *Bodies* 44).

Thus, my point in recalling here the necessary implication of resistant practices by the performative's tendency toward failure is to try to head off any foreclosure of what might constitute a politically transformative imagined violence, and to elaborate the question of "[w]hat performance where" might produce usefully disruptive effects (Butler, *Gender* 139).

Halberstam's theory is firmly focussed on how "depictions" of "'others' perpetrating [violence] against white men" might effect resistance in a racist, hetero-patriarchal culture (191). In this way, her theory engages in that "political task [which] is to promote a proliferation of representations, sites of discursive production, which [may] contest the authoritative production produced by the prohibitive law" (Butler, "Force" 119). As her theory depends upon a certain direct allusion by representation to the trajectories of its political intent, it might also be useful to further engage that model as Butler does, in the context of subversive citations of hate speech, in "a loosening of the link between act and injury" (*Excitable* 23).

If the relation between depiction and effect is unpredictable and indirect, is then "female revenge fantasy violence" necessarily the only configuration of imagined violence useful to a project of political disruption (Halberstam 191)? If part of the work of challenging phallogocentric economies of representation is the effort to "subvert the 'aboutness' we normally call the work's 'content'," could an imagined self-violating violence also be worth examining as a potentially useful strategy (Diamond 84)? Obviously, this is not to rehabilitate the logic of self-violation as a necessarily or irreducibly subversive gesture. If, however, the contradictory or failed speech act has

effect other than "the effect that is figured by the act" (Butler, *Excitable* 17)—for example, in the case of the fantasy-relations that a scene of usurpation may give rise to—could imagined self-violation sometimes usefully be a performance which, while not innocent of the economy of depiction, in fact "resides somewhere else" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 162)?

Principles of Self-Violation and Self-Violating Principles

A feminist theatre of interpellation—a dramatization of access to subjectivity—dwells upon relations of agency and language and how, in its interpellating function, language is "insulting us from the start" (Butler, *Excitable* 2). If it may be said that "signifying systems are always organized as bodies" (Phelan, "Reciting" 16), then this theatre is a kind of ordeal art; that subject who purposefully resubmits to symbolic subjection, a "marking off [which has] some normative force and, indeed, some violence" (Butler, *Bodies* 11), engages in a species of self-inflicted symbolic violence. This self-violation is not ordeal in the same sense as that of the ordeal of "physically, dynamically altering the body" (Hart, "Blood" 57), but is rather the ordeal of a subject, whose enactment of the interpellating functions of language constitutes a "public display of [symbolic] injury" (Butler *Excitable* 102).

This self-violation is a "staging of the drama of misrecognition" where the ordeal is *méconnaissance* itself (Phelan, *Unmarked* 152). If the joke may be taken as a paradigm of the shifting trajectories of subjectivity and desire in this scene, then that which constitutes the ordeal of a subject is at once the joke of a subject—for Lacan, "the joke of

human intersubjectivity": a subject's comic, perpetual efforts and failures in identificatory operations (Flieger 948). To stage this joke, then, is to resubmit to a location in language where the subject is "positioned both as addressed and addressing" (Butler *Excitable* 30). It is to tell the joke on oneself, as it were, to tell of comic failure and to degrade the figure of the sovereign subject to that of a "diminished" subject, which, like the infelicitious performative, fails to say what it means and to mean what it says (Schor 44).

An interrogation of how ideology "recruits" is in part testimony to a nominally ubiquitous symbolic violence, insofar as "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects" (Althusser 163, 164). But if the interpellative function of language is universal even to the reaches of the other, the object, and the abject—since "one can [also] be interpellated [...] through not being addressed"—this is not to say that the ordeal of subjection is uniform (Butler, *Excitable* 27). Since the feminine already fails to figure as subject in a phallogentric "circuit of recognition," a feminist joke of the subject puts to sea where that subject is already contradictory, already comically failed and improper, already functioning as the mistaken object of an always-masculine subject (Butler, *Excitable* 5). This ordeal is enacted in an economy where "[o]ne 'exists' not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being *recognizable*" (Butler, *Excitable* 5) and where in this particular sense woman is an "immaterial ghost" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 6). Clearly, then, this self-violating joke risks being, whatever its displacements, still an unhappy instance of that phallogentric joke which "radically disempowers the female spectator by obliging her to participate in her own objectification and victimization as the butt of the joke, if she is to participate at all" (Auslander, "Fem-

rage" 318). And to tell this joke, in an untransformative way, is to most perfectly behave as that hegemonic ideal, "subjects [who] 'work by themselves'" (Althusser 169).

This surely is the context of the appeal and, sometimes, the necessity of a model of politically subversive comedy which may not be mistaken for "the extravagance of reactive pathos" (Nietzsche 56) but which is rather a marked argument for and display of the rightness of feminist rage as the "natural state of women's being" in phallogentric culture (Auslander, "Fem-rage" 125). This is comedy in which rage is markedly "directed toward identifiable and bounded others in the external world" and which, Kahane argues, is "by its very nature is a force for change" (128). This outraged joke rejects any strategic qualification of "self-depreciation" in favour of an unambiguous oppositional attitude (Auslander, "Fem-rage" 326). In this respect, critical miming, which aims on the other hand to "'cite' the law to produce it differently [...]' 'cite' the law in order to reiterate and coopt its power," seems a much less appealing and more difficult technique for effecting political resistance (Butler, *Bodies* 15). Critical repetition, says Schor in defense of Irigaray, is a comparatively risky operation: "a transvaluation, rather than a repudiation of the discourse of misogyny, an effort to hold onto the baby while draining out the bathwater" (47).

If, however, agency in a postmodern attitude of revolt is necessarily a resolutely "reiterative or rearticulatory practice," as Butler emphasizes, then "[t]he question is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat" (*Bodies* 15; *Gender* 148). To the contrary of the suggestion that a self-betraying comedy of misrecognition constitutes a foreclosure of feminist-materialist intervention and a betrayal of "the kind of 'body' that feminism seeks to retrieve" (Butler, *Excitable* 33), Phelan writes: "[m]y understanding of the

unavoidability of misunderstanding leads me to believe this mistaking *is* history"

("Reciting" 17). In other words, if a self-violating joke effects a certain degradation of a subject, it may very well also be that "not all degradation is equal" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 17). Is it possible that a (not hysterical, but historical) self-violating joke, in its apparently problematic treachery toward a subject, may effect instead a very useful degradation of the Subject?

The point and the problem is "to try to recover the place of [one's] exploitation by discourse, without allowing [oneself] to be simply reduced to it" (Irigaray, "Power" 76). The sore spot here is how to make the difference in a scene of unmarked difference: how not to simply be the *rightly* improper subject who "shall make the gestures and actions of [her] subjection 'all by [her]self'" (Althusser 169). If this joke is necessarily told where the feminine subject already constitutes a comic failure, then to tell this joke critically is to "assume the feminine role deliberately," as Irigaray instructs, to enact the scene of one's subjection enthusiastically, to perform an imaginary pre-emptive violence ("Power" 76). Pre-emptive symbolic violence, or "preemptive exclusion" (Butler, "Force" 119), is thus at least the initiating movement of "deconstruction's 'two-step program'" (McKenzie 224). It is (oddly) a kind of usurpation, insofar as "women are supposed to be the objects of jokes, not joking subjects" (Auslander, "Comedy" 205).

As in the case of a marked scene of usurpation, however, pre-emption itself is not the end-point of this gesture. Usurpation, in the context of Irigaray's miming of Platonic discourse, for example, is "a taking of his place, not to assume it, but to show that it is occupiable, to raise the question of the cost and movement of that assumption" (Butler, *Bodies* 36). Likewise, if re-enacting the ordeal of a feminine subject constitutes a certain

self-degradation, that performance may also effectively demonstrate that "'femininity' seems to be a position or locus: anyone may be on the spot, the butt of the joke" (Flieger 957).

This pre-emption is not, however, a working toward subjective semblance at any cost, a "[clinging] to the terms that pain us because, at a minimum, they offer us some form of social and discursive existence" (Butler, *Excitable* 26). In other words, this is not to consolidate a subject called "submitter" who, in the provocation of and capitulation to certain failures of the subject, manages to refer to "a certain notion of liberal sovereignty [...] [which insists] that consent always and only constitutes the subject" (Butler, *Excitable* 85).⁴ Postmodern agency, on the contrary, "is not an exercise of agency at a distance, but precisely a struggle from within the constraints of compulsion" (Butler, *Excitable* 37). A productive model of postmodern resistance then is necessarily at once a strategization of transgressions and an interrogation of compulsory complicities, as the site of one's symbolic subjection is also an "enabling cultural condition" (Butler, *Bodies* 7). Although the figure of the submitter seems to afford a kind of liberation through absenteeism, in a postmodern attitude of revolt, attendance is mandatory.

A boundary of the real is a point of foreclosure, a vanishing point: "an imaginary point determined by the deployment" of the regulatory norms by which hegemonic logic regulates the material (Foucault, *History* 155). Naturally, as Butler notes, this vanishing point is a site where feminist projects have historically worked "to question the line according to which the distinction between the real and the unreal is drawn" ("Force"

⁴ See Schutzman, whose hysteric declares: "I let precariousness and speculation riddle my body" (138).

106). According to Foucault, however, transgression of the line, or the limit, does not (only) work to (re)install that which appears to lie beyond that limit, something "abusively reduced to silence" (Foucault, *History* 35). Rather, he argues, transgression's effect is to make difference, to "designate the existence of difference," and "to measure the excessive distance that [difference] opens at the heart of the limit" (*Language* 36,35). Similarly, in Halberstam's theory of an effective imagined violence, "the power of fantasy is not to represent but to destabilize the real" (199). In other words, transgressive operations are not properly descriptive projects, at least not descriptive projects which work by "assuming that "'selves' can be adequately represented within the visual or linguistic field" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 10). Their most useful effect, rather, is to render that point movable, and thus transformable. It is in this sense, then, that "[there] is no opposition to the lines drawn by foreclosure except through the redrawing of those very lines" (Butler, *Excitable* 140).

To trouble the designation of the real through the dramatization of an interpellative ordeal or subjective failure is a thoroughly self-implicating gesture, which approaches, as Phelan notes, the "imagination of annihilation and disappearance" (*Unmarked* 25). In this context, then, she marks the political imperative that this also be "work in which the costs of women's perpetual aversion are clearly measured" (*Unmarked* 164). If imagined self-violation constitutes the "traumatic political occasion" of a threatened, constrained, and failing subject, and traumatic repetition operates emphatically as "an ongoing subjugation, the restaging of injury," politically useful self-violating gestures must somehow repeat interpellative injuries "without precisely reenacting them" (Butler, *Excitable* 41). In other words, the usefulness of staging a

failing subject is not failure per se but the production of the troubling spectacle of that subject's very disappearing. It is in this particular sense that imagined self-violation "displays [...] more than it reveals" (Murray 3).

A display of disappearing is effected in imagined self-violating violence by its production of figures of discontinuity. As in the always improper scene of usurpation, the pre-emptive scene—the feminine instance of both being and telling a subjective joke—is the site of an apparently self-contradictory figure who "is excluded from the universal, and yet belongs to it nevertheless, [who] speaks from a split situation of being at once authorized and deauthorized" (Butler, *Excitable* 91). The self-contradictory figure is not, as in a descriptive project proper, a figure of "the 'Other' of the defining group" introduced into a symbolic economy from which it was previously excluded, but another other, one irrecoverable *as* other, "a boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogenous, dangerously unstable zone" (Stallybrass and White 193). In other words, Halberstam's proposed "counterrealities" (189) are the traumatic "specters of [...] hybrid economies" (Murray 2).

The threat posed by the scene of a discontinuous subject—the figure that tells and is the joke—is that of discontinuity itself. To (re)introduce discontinuity to a scene where identity is constituted by repetitions which, as Butler writes, "congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance," is to provoke and to precipitate "that primary scene in which the formation of the subject is tied to the circumscribed production of the domain of the speakable" (*Gender* 33; *Excitable* 139). Imagined self-violation, then, mimes that "founding violence" (Butler, *Bodies* 48) by which the identity of form is achieved in "the division or dissociation of itself" (Derrida 10).

Halberstam insistently situates the threat posed by imagined violence in the operations of fantasy. "Imagined violence creates a potentiality," she writes, "a utopic state in which consequences are immanent rather than actual, the threat is in the anticipation, not the act" (199). In comedy, the fear precipitated by scenes of imagined violence is an equivocal one. "The man who laughs is just about to be enveloped into the pattern of which his victim [in the comic scene] is already a part," writes Girard. "A man will not laugh, however, if that threat becomes too real. The conditions for laughter are therefore contradictory. The threat must be both overwhelming and nil" (128, 131). To situate the threat of the self-violating joke in equivocation is not, however, to diffuse the potential of its effects. Threat gains force in that very equivocation, by its production of a fantasy-real, or "the moment in which the phantasmic assumes the status of the real, that is, when the two become compellingly conflated" (Butler, "Force" 107).

Although in another context Butler counsels that "[t]o distinguish [...] testimony from the events it records, one would have to mark off the repetition of injury that testimony performs from the performance of injury to which it refers," here it is precisely that imagined self-violation which can *not* be marked off that produces confluences with useful effects (*Excitable* 95). This tension in the logic of the self-violating joke—between critique and repetition, telling and being, play and real, ability and disability, resistance and complicity, between "parodying excesses [...] or simply *enacting* them"—produces and makes palpable the productive force of imagined violence's threat (Auslander, "Comedy" 204). According to Butler, transformative re-citation "will emerge as *theatrical* to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses*" (*Bodies* 232). This is not to say that marked hyperbole is the

requisite of subversive effects but that the very equivocation of that gesture in relation to repetition and difference produces a theatre of the *other*, or makes apparent the theatricality of the other. In other words, the productive tension of the self-violating joke is an unease which "implicates us in a relation of knowingness about [language's] conventional force and meaning" (Butler, *Excitable* 100).

Representations of retributive violence, writes Halberstam, produce a fantasy that "contaminates by making information viral" (194). Imagined self-violation also exploits fear but qualifies in some ways the "fear of retaliation" that imagined retribution produces (Halberstam 191). If information is viral in the scene of the self-violating joke, that information = discontinuity / loss. Where in live performance "[t]he disappearance of the object is fundamental [...] [for performance] rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 147), a self-violating subject, by the (utopic) operations of a performative which aspires to be "a fundamentally material practice," might effect a traumatic proliferation as politically transformative as the retributive threat (Pollack 75). The self-violating joke precipitates *its* "crisis of spectatorship" at the primary or primal scene of the subject (Halberstam 196). To produce the information that identity "is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism" is to stage a subject's particular ordeal, but it is at once to produce that display in the universally implicating scene of interpellation (Butler, *Gender* 147). In other words, it is, in self-violating, to expose the *other's* "prior vulnerability to language" (Butler, *Excitable* 26).

The psychic threat of this gesture also has a materially contaminating logic, insofar as it implicates both the identificatory gestures and the body of the other.

"Although both [speech and writing] are bodily acts," Butler notes, "neither speech nor writing makes the body immediately present" (*Excitable* 152). In the context of performing the failing feminine subject by reference to the very cultural operations which regulate the "social existence of [that] body," this is indeed to know (from the position of the joking subject) "the volatility of one's place" (Butler, *Excitable* 5,4). In some sense though, the materially-implicating force of this performance may be emphasized, paradoxically, by the very vexed absence of the body in language ambitious to perform. In language, unlike the ordeal effected in and by altering the body, "[w]hose body it is [that is thus marked] can remain permanently unclear" (Butler, *Excitable* 152). Language which in this way brings into relief "the norms by which the 'one' becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" might be thus especially suited, by virtue of its very lack of bodily certification, for "exposing the body of the other as vulnerable to address" (Butler, *Bodies* 2; *Excitable* 13).

In the (re)functioning of a phallogentric economy which does not recognize women as subjects, it is essential "that no one should know who has deprived them, or why, and that 'nature' be held accountable" (Irigaray, "Power" 71), for power's "success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (Foucault, *History* 86). Thus, the self-implicating and usefully contaminating inference of the body in the self-violating joke returns to touch upon ideology, to jar those hegemonic cultural operations which "produce and vanquish bodies that matter" (Butler, *Bodies* 14) into "the historical concepts they are and have always been" (Fuss 7). While there is "no 'writing the body'" in imaginary self-violation, then, there may yet be a very productive "foregrounding of the apparatus that makes the writing impossible" (Diamond 85). In the context of a live

performance of bodily ordeal, a performer effectively "[makes] visible her attempt to offer what she does not have" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 147); in imagined self-violation, there is language which "[hails] loss and lost pleasure" (Pollack 74). In both contexts, "bad" or non-reproductive subjects invoke the "irrational" economy of self-violation and disappearance (Althusser 169).

The political interest of the logic of a self-violating joke for projects of resistance resides then in the extent to which self-implicating productions might constitute a "positive promise of castration" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 152). The economy of loss in the self-violating joke is a species of theatre: a joking subject is (comically, incompletely) precipitated, the butt of the joke is exposed (that very subject, displayed as a site of loss), and the joke's audience is "contaminated," insofar as the joke occasions "a circuit in which no one's identity remains uncontaminated by exposure to the Other's desire" (Flieger 945). In this respect, desire indeed "shows itself through failure" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 20). If imagined self-violation enacts a comic degradation of a subject who negotiates the normative and enabling functions of language by way of its own complicities and constraints, the injury suggested by this model also constitutes "a strange kind of resource" for subversive discursive practice (Butler, *Excitable* 38). For as Phelan writes, "the after-effect of disappearance is subjectivity itself" (*Unmarked*, 148).

Chapter Three: Primal Scenes in Sandra Bernhard's *I'm Still Here... Damn It!*

Stand-up has two important characteristics which, if well-used, are a huge asset to women performers and, by inference, women in general: it is very public and it is highly dependent upon personality. (Banks and Swift 1)

Although in the preceding chapter I have explored some alternative approaches to an outrage model of comedy, stand-up comedy is one of those contexts in which the public exercise and display of feminist outrage and an unambiguously oppositional attitude are useful in, and perhaps sometimes crucial to, a woman comic's success. And although Bernhard has done television, theatre, and film work, she continues to be identified with (and perhaps continues in different ways to practice) that stand-up style which during the 1980s helped establish her as a successful comic and "personality." In this respect, Bernhard's stand-up routines are usually identified as a markedly affective and expressive mode, a "[daring] [...] raw, stormy emotionalism, [punctuated by] sudden tantrums that repel or terrify" (Paglia 139). Inarguably, the sort of socio-political intelligibility to which Banks and Swift allude is an awfully useful trapping, however it comes to be assured, and it seems clear that the implied force and efficacy of Bernhard's "defiant, openly aggressive" attitude are informing factors in her success in winning it (Stone, "Pretty"). As one reviewer observes, "Sandra Bernhard doesn't light up a room, she takes it over. Maybe even holds it captive for a while" (Haynes). Bernhard herself describes stand-up comedy as "'the most simplistic kind of entertainment. It's almost gladiatorial'" (cited in Taylor 140). In such a starkly organized scene of discursive pugilistics and oppositional power plays, the successful woman comic is perhaps a doubly usurping figure. In the first place, "[t]o tell a joke is to take the subject position: to

assert subjectivity" (Goodman 289). To become, at that, a "Queen of Amazon comedians" is in this context to emerge especially victorious (Burkes).

Personality notwithstanding, the terms of this victory are at least partly set by the very organization of the scene in which it is achieved. "I developed that hostile style to get control'," notes Bernhard. "It was me on a lineup with fifteen others, usually men, and a few self-deprecating women. I was angry in that space. I was fighting for attention" (cited in Christon 24). In other words, here marked outrage is instrumental in achieving a certain measure of both psychic self-preservation and subjective visibility which, however qualified and in whatever terms, *is* an enabling effect. At the same time, while a scene of eruptive reversals of power is markedly oppositional, it does not necessarily constitute an irrecoverable disorganization of hegemonic terms. In fact, "the transgression of a taboo is no less subject to rules than the taboo itself" (Bataille 65). If transgression is intelligible only according to and by the terms which it disrupts, and where stand-up comedy is traditionally understood to be "a male domain: aggressive, dangerous and obscene," then the successful woman comic is at once a cross-over, or male-identified, figure (Banks and Swift 1).

As Halberstam argues, crossing-over is not a perfectly regulated movement, and, as such, constitutes a useful disturbance of the logic of the comic subject (191). However, where Bernhard's "outrageous" cross-over is effected in a stand-up comedy mode, as joke, as already a matter of comic-sense, the threat of the reversal to some extent constitutes part of that joke, and the putatively male-identified Bernhard is in this scene always a pretender figure in terms of intelligibility. The "pretender" term is one that, I will argue, Bernhard does not cease to exploit, but here, because the figure is so firmly

yoked to a logic of rigidly oppositional reversal, her implied threat is necessarily a comic one, and may not invoke the productive equivocation between fantasy and the real that such a threat may engender. After all, however the joke might gesture toward an imagined violence, "real" aggression is not funny (Gutman 60).⁵

Perhaps it is this very rigidity of organization—in the order of jokes, compulsory eruptions, and, for the woman comic, scenes of comic reversal—that Bernhard has in mind when she admits, "I hated the contrivance of stand-up" (cited in Christon 24). If Bernhard's potentially transformative gestures, however usefully they may enable her to "figure," *also* work to re-enforce hegemonic configurations of the subject and to thus re-consolidate the very limits that they stand to disrupt, it appears to be true in this instance that "organised transgression together with the taboo make social life what it is" (Bataille 65). Perhaps it is in this sense—where transgression ultimately serves to shore up a hegemonic apparatus—that, as Bernhard notes, "[i]f you can survive [stand-up comedy,] you learn it has nothing to do with you" (cited in Holden, "Sandra").

Bernhard's resistance to and distressing of this particular scenario, even in her stand-up act, might be marked by observing that, as early as 1983, "she doesn't tell jokes" (Lewis). Bernhard describes her 1986 nightclub act as more "like a theater piece" (cited in Martin and Segrave 413). Rather than a "gladiatorial" scene of reversed-forces, then, Bernhard gestures here toward relinquishing the direct and immediate, originary but comic threat of the outrageous joke, and emphasizes instead the inflection of forces, the indirection of effect, and the display of threat (rather than its putative actualization) in a

⁵ "I tell jokes," says stand-up comedian Beatrice Berry, "so that I don't have to kill people" (cited in Fraiberg).

theatre of retribution. This, she qualifies elsewhere, is not "*thee-ah-ter*" (cited in Musto 60). Bernhard carefully situates her work rather in that place of performance which "[u]nlike conventional theatre [...] does not rely upon narrative and representation and, more importantly [...] refuses meaning" (Bennett 79). As Halberstam also insists of imagined violence, Bernhard's outrage does not (only) work toward the imposition of excluded representations into the representational field but toward destabilizations which may impose movability itself onto the limit which regulates that field. "The intended effect'," explains Bernhard's co-writer John Boskovich of *Without You I'm Nothing*, "is to lead you along and then dishevel you. We're really interested in that moment of impasse when you don't know where to go or what to think" (cited in Cante 71).

Bernhard's emphasis on performance rather than on jokes direct or proper nominally jars her work from the strict terms of resolutely male-identified stand-up comedy, insofar as this stance is recognizable in terms of a more generally observed practice. "One significant contribution of women's comedy," writes Goodman, "has been a shift in the form of the medium: from jokes with punchlines to other forms like narrative comedy, theatrical comedy and cabaret" (Goodman 294). On the other hand, however her performance may have thus "grown shapely" in form, Bernhard's refusal of the male-identified joking posture does not necessarily entail a relinquishing of the threat of the confrontational other (Stone, "Pretty"). Rather, her insistence on the theatrical aspects of her work points to a movement from the direct ambitions of "real" and immediate rage to the exploitation of the effective force of the threat of retributive exposure. The example of this technique most often noted is from Bernhard's 1988 stage production of *Without You I'm Nothing*, in which she reportedly "played an

embarrassingly ingratiating message that a *Village Voice* critic had left on her answering machine," in order to expose and ridicule Laurie Stone's "smarmy" gesture (Franklin 113). This certainly doesn't sound like that feminist humour which prides itself on being "[p]ickup [not putdown] humor." *That* feminist humour "is based on equity. Through it, we do not laugh *at* people, we bond *with* them" (G. Kaufman, *Pulling* 16). On the contrary, Bernhard's "[s]ado-stand-up" is less bonding than bondage (Wadler 38).

One critic wonders if Bernhard's exposure of Stone is a "mutual joke," to Bernhard's vehement protestations here and in other print interviews (Ward 15). More to the point here is that, "real" or not, the gesture invokes in that very equivocation a threat of exposure which bears effective force in "the anticipation that the limits will be pushed to the breaking point, that the 'scene' will cross over into the 'real'" (Hart, "Doing" 52). Bernhard's *display* of a scene of putatively retributive exposure functions for the spectator as a representation which "gathers steam, [and] acquires density" precisely because it threatens to proliferate (Halberstam 93). In other words, "we laugh because the crisis is not happening to us" (Banks and Swift 109). However, as Franklin admits about the Stone episode, while "[t]his was probably very funny [...] a little dread must have seized the hearts of people in the audience even as they were laughing: *What if she kills me next?*" (Franklin 113).

Thus, as Halberstam emphasizes, this threat plays out as an effective (real) disruption of the spectator's or voyeur's position of "safety in 'looking'" (Forte 263). The force of Bernhard's display of exposure is implicative, for a spectator's "visibility [implies] a role in the [performance's] action" (Bennett 97). If the relationship between "the looker and the given to be seen is a version of the relation between self and other,"

then this exposure is precisely that of the spectator's identificatory interest and involvement in the scene, the spectator's seeking to be seen in and by the other (Phelan, *Unmarked* 3). The threat of exposure, then, implicates the spectator in a species of misrecognized *self*-interest, where their desire is precisely *for* exposure, insofar as "the desire to see always touches the desire to be seen" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 21).

In other words, Bernhard's display is an exposure of the spectator's ideological and productive interest in the given-to-be-seen (Bennett 35), where "in looking at/for the other, we seek to represent ourselves to ourselves" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 21). This interest or relationship, as Phelan writes, is both "a marked one, which is to say it is unequal" and violent, for "the [requisite] failure of this hope [...] produces violence, aggressivity, [and] dissent" (*Unmarked* 4). In another scene from the shows which incorporate the Stone episode, Bernhard openly enacts the ambivalence of this relation. Addressing a man in the audience, she says: "'I really like you. I'm really attracted to you.' Then the face goes mask hard. 'And yet there's something about you,' she continues. 'I'd really like to smash your face'" (Stone, "Pretty"). Ultimately, Bernhard points here to the symbolic violence inherent in spectatorial pleasure. Her displays of imagined violence, in other words, "force you to ask what it is, exactly, she's doing up there, and also what, exactly, you're doing watching her" (Franklin 112).

Such threatening tactics have enabled and informed Bernhard's development of and recognition as an "authoritative" stage presence (Stone, "Pretty"). Again, in comedy, a field in which the low percentage of women "attests to their lack of credibility as a power figure," Bernhard's success as an authoritative comic "terrorist" is a politically

significant achievement (Martin and Segrave 20). And surely her appearance on Broadway in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* is evidence of a certain "accumulation of symbolic capital (and therefore of social elevation)" (Stallybrass and White 198). I'd like then to take Bernhard's appearance on Broadway as an imagined moment in which her emergence as an initiate (comic) subject is in the clear. For if that assumption is informed and enabled by imagined retributive violence, as I have argued, how might those threatening gestures function as the motions of a (comically) proper subject?

In other words, Bernhard's "outrageous" comedy engenders threat precisely insofar as it comprises the violent gestures of the "wrong" person; as these gestures enable her to figure as (comic) subject, however, she "no longer needs to resort to terror tactics" (Franklin 113). At this moment, these tactics are not only unnecessary, and not only no longer transgressive as such, but actually *regressive*. As the practice of an authoritative presence, "what may once have seemed—as Bernhard would say, in the breathy, urgent voice she uses to mock ad pitches—'edgy, fun, fresh' would now seem simply an error in judgement" (Franklin 113). In this position of comic mastery, Bernhard is equally a rehabilitated figure, for in measuring comic threat and its success *as* comedy, "a good person's hostile act [is seen] as less hostile and more humorous" (Gutman 60). In other words, Bernhard's success is not only a matter of talent, strategy, effort or power but also of her figuration in and by a hegemonic circuit of recognition. Mainstream success in this instance is not (only) a narrative of Bernhard's coming into her own, as it were, but a drama of the very precipitation of a subject, insofar as "neither submission [to subjection] nor mastery [of subjective skills] is performed by a subject" but rather are the formalizing moments of that subject (Butler, *Psychic* 117).

Even as these tactics comprise the practice with which Bernhard has become identified and by which she has become identifiable, then, they are now the "desperate" measure of a previously incompetent comic or, as I am arguing, a previously incompetent subject. At this point, Bernhard's terror tactics "shock less than proclaim her eagerness to shock, and seem left over from a period when she was less assured and needed to make a quick, intense impression" (Stone, "Pretty"). Other critics and Bernhard herself characterize her earlier comedy this way.⁶ My point here is that although these *are* the gestures of a "less assured" comic, however that might be true in terms of the personal, it is *also* true in an ideological sense: these are the subversive gestures of an unauthorized, unrecognized, unqualified *subject*. And to persistently emphasize or retroactively install that "disability" as only an individual problem—and the assumption of subjective authority as strictly a matter of effort, taste, personality, virtue or consciousness; of ambition and not of compulsion too—is to occlude the ways in which this subject embodies certain ideological imperatives.

On the other hand, this is not quite a seamless scene of the inception of a good subject. Bernhard is here a nominally good *enough* (male-identified) subject, who is seen to reproduce a subjective language not properly her own. Bernhard as (comic) subject is yet an ambiguous figure, and potentially threatening in the sense of that anomaly which "threatens the integrity of individual categories, being 'either this or that something else'" (Stewart, *Nonsense* 61). However, it might also be possible to trace in this situation how "changes in the system of order will bring about incorporation of anomalous, ambiguous,

⁶ "'The anger thing, the smartass thing, always worked'," Bernhard notes. "'But I'm better than that now'" (cited in Kort 53).

and ambivalent categories and the creation of new categories of these types" (Stewart, *Nonsense* 61). In other words, the extent to which Bernhard is recognized for "[winning] over audiences by the 'sheer force of her personality'" is also a measure of how she stands as a *figure* of ambiguity (Moritz 16), as which her threatening gestures may be recuperated as style or "mannerism" (Eco 6). Audiences thus "come for her personality" (Herndon), that "confrontational 'in-your-face' stage presence that has become her theatrical signature" (Moritz 16). And the degree to which, as Bernhard claims, "[t]he comedy [she] used to do, which was about being in a real bad place, is being done all over the joint now" is evidence of that signature proving to be appropriable, reproducible, and re-consumable (cited in Als). To the extent that Bernhard "has built her career on keeping the audience guessing about her sincerity," then, her threatening strategies engender a pleasurable comic-sense (Franklin 112). In other words, this threat is effectively contained to the performing figure, foreclosing its implicative potential to touch upon the spectator. In this context Bernhard is something like that joker who Douglas describes as a "privileged person who can say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity. He [sic] is by no means anything like a taboo breaker whose polluting act is a real offense to society" ("Jokes" 107).

Nevertheless, where difference in the field of the visible real is marked by and in the performing body from whence the performance is (re)issued, the woman comic is yet a contradictory figure, and the ambiguous yet constitutes a threat. In this sense, I would argue, Bernhard continues to stand as a figure of both sanctioned authority and of ambiguous danger. This very point of efficacy, however, may mark the limits of usefulness of a retributive stance, the threat posed by the "wrong" person (the "wrong"

body) engendering an imagined retributive violence. If this strategy exploits the production of an implied origin, there is also the problem that "[p]ower loses its appearance of priority [...] when it is wielded by the subject" (Butler, *Psychic* 13). In other words, to exploit the visually disruptive promise of how "[t]he female body as subject clashes in dissonance with its patriarchal text" is also to invite the location of the performance and its effects in the problematic body, rather than in dissonance itself and in the patriarchal text *as well* (Forte 254). This may effectively recontain the threat borne of that performative contradiction to its bodily site, and re-enforce the traditional logic that the successful woman comic's performance comprises "merely aspects of her 'self' which she displays" (Gray 9).

Thus, there is here what seems to me a remarkable tendency to contain the threat of the vexed body of the performing other *to* that body, precisely as her cultural capital is on the rise and as her body becomes all the more palpably incompatible with the subject category. Reviews are full of references to Bernhard's performance as a bodily style: the anomalous comic, "[a]t five feet ten and only 106 pounds, with thick lips and prominent nose [...] [has] a face and body that could easily convey the offbeat" (Martin and Segrave 411); the carnivalesque other has "exaggerated eyes and mouth" (Eller 4). Bernhard is so marginal, with "[t]hat gaudy, almost prehensile mouth;" she's barely properly human (Christon 23). The terrorist's face, writes Wadler, is "pure terror" (36). These references are almost always to Bernhard's face; comments on her height and weight are relatively rare. I suppose this might evidence the degree to which the thinner and thinner woman does not exacerbate terms of excess or lack but rather endlessly approaches that

vanishing point which, in some ways, would constitute the very "inhabitation" of her proper category.

There still is here a theoretical promise that failing to properly figure constitutes a potentially disruptive intrusion upon the hegemonic representational field. "Comedy," says Porter, in this sense "is perhaps the one arena in contemporary culture where physical shortcomings can be translated into cultural capital (81).⁷ Of course, if this is true in a comic sense, it is not necessarily politically so; after all, "[e]xceeding is not escaping" (Butler, *Psychic* 17). This is not to offer a transgressive gesture that resoundingly does constitute "escape," but to wonder if such a model re-enforces the sense of the woman (comic) subject as pretender to the linguistic competency that distinguishes the proper subject. It is easy, where the comic is seen to embody her disruptive effects, or "[w]here women are visibly making people laugh, [to] deny the existence of a conscious creative process" (Gray 8).

On the other hand, comic excess and lack *is* potentially transgressive, in the spirit of the comic failure model, where hyperbolic excess works to "exaggerate stereotypes" and to show the absurdity of the terms, and where performances of the "pathetic" "warp, stretch and recreate these images through their parody" (Douma 127). The hope here, of course, is that in such a performance "[o]ppressive contexts and restrictive values would be ridiculed, rather than the characters who are struggling against such restrictions" (Merrill 275). In theory, then, the comically "inept" performance of the body is potentially subversive, where "the admission of failure is made finally unconvincing by

⁷ Helen Atkinson Wood says: "I think that you have the first advantage if you look peculiar, because then that's the first joke" (cited in Banks 86).

the exaggerated nature of the standards the woman is expected to meet, so that what appears superficially to be capitulation to the stereotype of the inept woman becomes an indictment of the values of a culture that trivializes her life" (Walker 125). I would argue, though, that there is a tendency even on the part of those who are seeking transformation in the scene of such comic failure to contain crises of representation to the apparent fact of the "problem" of the body of the performing other.

Some readings of Bernhard's dance number at the end of (the film) *Without You I'm Nothing* seem to be a case in point. This performance, one writer argues, usefully "increases the audience's awareness of the objectification of women's bodies in entertainment" (Hill 27). The idea is that this is an instance of comic failure where "we smile because of the contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are no longer sure that it is the character who is at fault. Maybe the frame is wrong" (Eco 8). At the same time, though, the gesture here is persistently measured by however "awkwardly" (Fuchs 203) Bernhard's "self-depreciating," "unskillful," "pathetic" dance is performed (Hill 27). Leaving aside any argument about the deftness of Bernhard's dance, I would like simply to note that Bernhard herself sees the crucial aspect of displacement in this scene as being effected not by (or, not *only* by) her body's vocabulary of movement but in and by the performance's actual and perceived *duration*. "If the scene had lasted just one or two minutes, it would be totally gratuitous and serving all those things that we're trying to critique'," Bernhard says. "Taking it on my terms to that uncomfortable extreme demystifies the sexuality and exploitation" (cited in Walters 162). Indeed, as Auslander tellingly confesses, "the scene goes on and on" (*Presence* 162). The scene doesn't *really*

go on and on, but that it goes on long enough to make it seem to do so perhaps marks the scene's vacillation between an easier-to-valorize carnivalesque or comic failure and a putative scene of non-comic (imaginary) punishment.⁸ In other words, the scene at once invokes that carnivalesque citation of the law *and* veers toward a relinquishing of comic license. This is not to argue that Bernhard's bodily style is "innocent" in and of the performance, but to note that a crucial aspect of the transgressive gesture is occluded in these readings by their tendency to posit the performance to and in her body, rather than reading this as *also* the enactment of a hegemonic genre collapsing under its own weight.

Notwithstanding the disruptive promise of the performance of the body in these contexts, where and when that performance is credited strictly to the marked gestures and effects of that body, the implicative effect of that gesture is at least partly contained and defused. And thus, subversive potential here falls prey to the representational convention that "public rituals enacted on the human body are taken to express personal and private concerns" (Douglas, *Purity* 115). That is to say, the tendency here is to locate failure in relation to a category as *only* a private problem. "A large, wide nose greets an expansive, flexible smile," a critic writes of Bernhard. *Bernhard*, she says, "is obsessed by her appearance" (Stone, "Pretty"). Interviewing Bernhard about her stand-up act, a critic theorizes: "[d]oes the actress have an anorectic situation?" (Wadler 38). The "problem," in other words, is thereby shouldered by the performer's putatively neurotic bodily ego. The work that the body is asked to do here, obviously, is to take responsibility for the most subversive implications of comic failure: its allusion to that "joke form in the social

⁸ Eco cites "the prerequisites of a 'good' carnival" as "(i) the law must be so pervasively and profoundly introjected as to be overwhelmingly present at the moment of its violation [...] (ii) the moment of carnivalization must be very short" (6).

structure" which is the ideological and productive nature of interpellative categories, and the universal reaches of excess and lack in relation to those categories (Douglas, "Jokes" 96). It seems to me, then, that the reviewer of Bernhard's *Without You I'm Nothing* who complains that Bernhard is only "a symptom" of cultural malaise rather underestimates the important social work done by the symptom in this instance (D. Kaufman). For if "the experience of a joke form in the social structure calls imperatively for an explicit joke to express it" (Douglas, "Jokes" 96), Bernhard as symptom is exactly that "bodily place [holder]" by which hegemony's own excess or lack may be handily contained and repositied (Phelan, *Mourning* 54).

In this way, the subversively threatening figure sometimes works as a "constitutive outside" of hegemonic subject categories (Hart, "Doing" 56). And it is at least partly this function for which Bernhard is recognized as a comic authority. As one reviewer claims, "in the nineteen-eighties [...] [when Bernhard] started to attract national attention as a comedian, it was largely because she was so good at complaining" (Als). On the one hand, the disaffected other is a kind of authority figure, in the vein of those who are vested with "powers to bless or curse" (Douglas, *Purity* 99). On the other, the necessarily eruptive other is also the site from which an identity-promising "reprimand" is wrested (Butler, *Psychic* 112), in that identificatory scene "where the presence of a curse [...] wounds, but at least defines" (Hartman 131). In other words, Bernhard is less devastating than "scolding," which in this interpellative sense is also to be blessing (Burkes).⁹ To the extent that this is a compulsory discourse of the other, its disruptive

⁹ Thus Bernhard's status as a "patron cynic" (Burkes).

potential is re-figured as a social contract in which hegemony "speaks" both opposing terms as a way of "assimilating the drama" of difference (Butler, *Excitable* 131).¹⁰

In this sense, then, Bernhard's nominal mainstream success is also a measure of the extent to which her "outrageous" performance strategies come to function as compulsory eruptions *in* a hegemonic theatre of the reproduction of the visible real. Thus, Bernhard declares, "I would never make a declaration of anything'"; nevertheless, she wryly adds, she is recognized as someone "'who's all about, supposedly, being real'" (cited in Chua 37). If it is true, as Camille Paglia boasts, that Bernhard is "completely American," and that "[n]o other country can produce this kind of brashly individualistic woman, harsh, aggressive, raunchy and physical" (Paglia 138), then this may be most true in an ideological and regulatory sense, in the logic of what Phelan terms one of "the most self-satisfying ideologies of the United States: you are welcome here as long as you are productive." In other words, Phelan's again: "[t]he production and reproduction of visibility are part of the labor of the reproduction of capitalism" (*Unmarked* 11).

Sharing

The preceding imagined narrative of hegemonic recuperations of Sandra Bernhard's "outrageous" posture of confrontation is the informing context of my discussion of two particular stage productions of Bernhard's 1998/1999 show *I'm Still Here... Damn It!*. For if comedy is resolutely "commercially based," Bernhard's success in this mainstream theatrical context is not only a moment of ideological and social

¹⁰ Scarry notes that (in the context of physical pain) complaint is "the nonpolitical equivalent of [the coerced] confession" (54).

recognition but one resoundingly material as well (Gray 147). "I wouldn't mind a little bit more of the mainstream following'," Bernhard reminds an interviewer, "'cause they're the people who pay the money'" (cited in Ward 13). And surely Broadway is one of the places they pay it. Both the production at Broadway's Booth Theater and the "direct from Broadway" show at San Francisco's Theater on the Square—at the heart of a commercial and tourist Bermuda Triangle drawn by McDonald's, the Powell streetcar, and The Gap—are in this sense marked occasions not of terror but of leisured abundance. With the high cost of a Broadway show and, in San Francisco, the particularly extravagant Saturday night admission constituting "part of the attraction" of these events (Bennett 126), Bernhard is clearly positioned here as a "postmodern showgirl" with the cachet of that "quintessential symbol of the sophisticated distractions of metropolitan life" (Stuart 210, 2).

Both cities saw successful runs of the show in smaller, presumably less mainstream venues and so, to the degree that there is a "limited cross-over" in terms of theatrical constituencies, these shows are promising points at which to test the mainstream value of an encounter with the confrontational figure I've described above (Bennett 106).¹¹ In the CD recording of *I'm Still Here... Damn It!*, recorded live in 1998 at the Westbeth, Bernhard alludes to this cross-over in the voice of "a visitor from uptown" who admits: "usually I go see acts like Joan Rivers [...]" Bernhard's more *presentational*." In some ways then another country is heard from in the Broadway production, and a potential intelligibility problem is presupposed. In the Westbeth

¹¹ *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* ran previously at New York's Westbeth Theater, and San Francisco's Alcazar Theater.

recording, Bernhard anticipates this: "we're going to bring it uptown soon, where no one will understand a word I'm saying. I'll be praying every night that I can get through the show." Obviously, Bernhard drops this reference in both of the productions that I attended; after all, performance "succeeds only to the degree that it brings its audience to identify with it" (Pellegrini 9). At the Booth, she instead read from a newspaper review of *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* that observed: "there were so many fashionable people at the show." This is a dangerous identificatory offering, surely, and when Bernhard raised her eyebrows expectantly, or sceptically, and the audience, confounded or prudent, made no response.

On the other hand, Bernhard—"best known for her appearances on Roseanne"—is also not a radically cross-over figure at this juncture (Moritz 15). Neither television nor Off-Broadway are completely other countries here, as the ads for Off-Broadway productions in the Booth's *Playbill* attest. In San Francisco, a clot of the faithful up in a corner of the balcony anticipated Bernhard's entrance with loud giggles and mutual "shushing," at once acknowledging and mocking the very camp "eventness" of Bernhard's star and lesbian "royalty" status. And surely something of the television personality's "double presence" was intelligible to those other audience members at the same show who laughed constantly, almost hysterically, throughout the first few "straight" musical numbers (Bennett 162).

In New York, the "event" quality of Broadway itself also inflects a production's appeal (Bennett 109). At the Booth, on a Monday night, when theatres are usually closed, the assumption might be made that at least part of this audience were people resolutely bound for Broadway and not necessarily for Bernhard. At a point of faint audience

response, Bernhard made a pre-emptory gesture toward this possibility. "Remember," she chastened, "you could have gone to see 'The Scarlet Pimpernel' down the street. Or 'Footloose,' if we're scraping the bottom of the barrel. Oh *yeah*, it's Monday. I'm the only show in town."

Nevertheless, Bernhard's reputation and success as a figure of pleasurable confrontation precedes her and constitutes the primary promise and premise of the show, a potential in which advertising naturally colludes. Flyers trumpet that *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* is a "wild ride" that is "wildly, jaw-droppingly funny!" Bernhard's promotional photograph, where she winks, apparently naked but for a ball cap or bunny-ears and a "friendship" bracelet, practically guarantees that she is not only a team player but a good sport as well. The Booth's resuscitation masks and latex gloves, "at the ticket taker's stand in the theater lobby," says *Playbill*, will *not* be necessary, because although "[t]he audience never knows where [Bernhard's] going [...] it's worth the trip!"

And anyway, the audience *does* know where Bernhard is going. She's going to Broadway, which suggests a certain guarantee of an inevitably, avowedly, excessively theatrical performance.¹² In other words, to the extent that *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* is, as Bernhard claims, "'the millenium's answer to Broadway musicals'," any imagined threat here will be sprung in the friendly form of big-hearted musical entertainment (cited in Kort 49). At the Booth Bernhard herself tests and finds the genre "true" in her hilarious but (or because) perfectly plausible Broadway number about mad cow disease. Indeed, the rote musicality of the closing line of the very first number—"sometimes you have to

¹² I would call this, after Freud, the Broadway envelope.

put on a little bit of an act, and tonight that's where I'm at"—was happily predicted and co-sung by the man sitting behind me at the Booth.

If "the [theatrical] spectator spends money in anticipation of receiving pleasure from the product he or she has contracted to receive and the conditions in which he or she is to receive it," the full or near-full houses at both shows evidence the value of the fantasy of an encounter with the confrontational other (Bennett 88). The actual productions, though, appear to mark an about-face in Bernhard's practices and attitude. Reviewers concur: "[t]here's less snarling [...] in Bernhard's act than there once was" (Franklin 113). Here Bernhard the "putdown artist gets positive" (Als), and exhibits "a newfound gentleness" (Kort 53). Invoking the spectre of her "I'd like to smash your face" technique, Bernhard did try to single out an audience member at the Booth, asking the stage manager, "are there any cute ones out there?" And notably, the audience became *very* quiet. Still, her opening song, demeanor, and commentary in both shows all suggest that, as she says, "it's a love thing between you and me."

Bernhard's "love," her apparent relinquishing of a confrontational posture and of its attendant comic effect, comes with apparently bewildering professions of honesty. In *I'm Still Here... Damn It!*, Bernhard explains in an interview, "I've moved on to new territory, telling funky stories about my own heartache instead of coming down so hard on other people just because I was holding back from talking honestly about myself" (cited in Als). This sounds much like Foucault's confession, where "one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell" (*History* 59). In that confession, telling is less the liberation of the subject than its very formalization, where "performing [language] skills laboriously works the subject into its status as a social

being" (Butler, *Psychic* 119). In Bernhard's situation, though, as a putatively male-identified (comic) subject, this is not exactly the scene of a proper subject but of a rehabilitated feminine, who works toward "a sharing of experience rather than a demonstration of cleverness" (Walker xii). Reviewers wonder: has Bernhard been "softened" by motherhood, or by the Kaballah (Kort 53)?

Of course, if anger may constitute technique then so might honesty. If it is true that "it has become fashionably conventional to be outrageous, which has taken the 'outrage' out of the equation and made it mediocre," this is only to say that rage in the hands of the so-called wrong person is sometimes, as in Bernhard's case, exactly right (D. Kaufman). Thus it seems to me that Bernhard's substitutions here are not so much capitulations as they are responses and challenges to that "change of order" which, as I have argued above, so successfully refigures her outrageous strategies toward hegemonic ends. After all, says Bernhard, "[t]he great thing about stand-up comedy is that you've got to learn to adjust to every audience and you have to learn how to manipulate them and win them over" (cited in Taylor 140). To win them over, or to win over them: Bernhard's "love" mode, I would argue, is simply an adjustment from victorious outrage to another sort of vanquishing.

In this respect, perhaps the most critical aspect of Bernhard's about-face is the pre-emptory air of its "reenactment of [interpellative] injury" (Butler, *Excitable* 100). Her embrace of the confessional mode is enthusiastic and ostentatious; she makes herself "available" in the sense of that interpellative scene which Butler characterizes, after Althusser, as one where an individual "rushes toward the law" and the law's promise of subjection (Butler, *Psychic* 129). In other words, Bernhard the good-enough subject

works toward being a *really* good subject, in the spirit of Bergson's automaton, "a machine that works automatically" (32).

However comic the nonsensical logic of self-violation might be, Bernhard's withholding of a confrontational other engenders a certain theatrical disappointment. After all, this performance is built upon the promise of that very figure, a fantasy into which Bernhard's "honesty" and "love" intrude. "They don't tell you about the tender moments in the reviews, do they?" she taunts gently. Here, Bernhard's newfound sincerity "runs contrary to our perception of Bernhard as a sexy brawler [...] [who] held in thrall an audience who prized her persona [...] and relished her lacerating, confrontational demeanor" (Bernstein). This arrest of oppositional pleasure is not only disappointing but also potentially discomfiting in its implicative reaches, for Bernhard's spectators, insofar as they are ready with "necessary receptive strategies," "[take] on his/her role(s) before the performance per se begins" (Bennett 105, 133).

In this sense, the imagined hetero-patriarchal spectator in this encounter is pre-cast in a performance where figures of difference "'play themselves' as a backdrop against which the privileged individual can assert his difference" (Gray 148). That is to say, if the self-identical sovereign subject is engaged in the fantasy of "a fresh word that can only come from themselves," the inflection of that fantasy in this theatre is that "fresh word" which comes from the confrontational other (Foucault, *Archeology* 211). Compared to a "scathing" (Franklin, 112) or "devastating" *engagement* with the audience (Marks), Bernhard's dramatization of that "peculiar turning of the subject against itself" in the moment of its own inception amounts to an infuriating (nonsensical) self-involvement (Butler, *Psychic* 18). And if, as I have argued, Bernhard's outrageous gestures sometimes

are "repetitions [which] become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (Butler, *Gender* 139), then the withholding of these transgressions "must of necessity be [itself] a kind of taboo behaviour" (Stewart, *Nonsense* 89).

For audience members who identify pleasurably *with* Bernhard, her apparently conciliatory stance is equally disappointing. Here, rather than a cheering carnivalesque attitude of "creative disrespect" (Stallybrass and White 19), is the "awkward and embarrassing" agency in and of subjection (Butler, *Psychic* 17). Oppositional figures are rightly outrageous, insofar as "to behave anti-socially is the proper expression of their marginal status" (Douglas, *Purity* 97); Bernhard's "star noblesse oblige" (Christon 23) and "newfound glow of self-love" look like a relinquishing of that disaffection (Als). As one reviewer/stalker puts it, "[a]s [Bernhard] gets truly glamorous [...] she treads thin ice: the very braggadocio that was endearing [...] now threatens to make us hate her!" (Lieberman 10).

Of course, to withhold the confrontational other is not altogether to withhold representation and its opportunities for pleasurable identifications. Bernhard's promise of "honesty" does not deny but shifts terms of engagement, from the guarantee of the other's reprimand to that of confession proper, which still invites the persistence of that principle which desperately seeks her "original expression" (Auslander, *Presence* 156). The promise is at least partly generic: the conventions of "one-person cabaret" include a certain requisite "lure of confession" (Indiana, "Read"). And as Bernhard herself emphasizes: "I pound out the shit, the passion, the poetry, the pathos, the drama, and then I bring it to New York [or San Francisco] and share it with you."

Bernhard's invitation to identification re-poses the implicative force circumscribed in the drama of the confrontational other. "I think that to be angry is to be really cut off," Bernhard observes in an interview (cited in Taylor 141). On the other hand, in identification, "individuals effectively solder their egos to others, both real and imagined" (Pellegrini 10). As one reviewer confesses, "it's hard not to feel a kinship with someone who parades her envies, jealousies, pet peeves and obsessions so publicly" (Marks). But, as Bernhard reveals in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!*: "I have touched the people who believe that I am absolutely grounded." This identification, in other words, stands upon a misrecognized real. Bernhard announces that Sarah Bernhardt also performed on this stage at the Booth, and as Pellegrini notes, "[t]he name 'Sarah Bernhardt' has also come to be identified with histrionics and 'over-the-top' self-theatricalization" (54).¹³ Bernhard's absolutely affective delivery of the song "God is Good," prefaced by her breathless confession of spiritual awakening, is followed by another confession: "all through that song I was thinking of all the things I have to do at home. My mind was all over the place. I think I left something in the fridge at the hotel." In other words, again Pellegrini's, identification as collaboration "invites the happy scene of individuals making common cause—identifying—with each other. But collaboration also conjures up the troubling specter of the double agent, that treasonous representative of misplaced identifications" (9).

These offerings and undercuttings of presence and the "real" effectively invoke an identificatory threat. In Bernhard's earnest poetry reading ("earnest" poetry, "earnest" reading,) she reads from papers she plucks from a music stand beside her, as though this

were fresh material, not yet memorized, still "warm." (This visual vocabulary was repeated in the San Francisco show.) There were no laughs whatsoever at this, even though Bernhard is clearly a skilled writer and *this* writing was so hilariously bad. Laughter erupted only when Bernhard framed this as material she performed "all summer at Lilith Fair." The audience either presumed that the reading was in earnest, or they were just too afraid to laugh in the hush—I certainly was. The menace of these invitations is palpable in Franklin's review. "You somehow sense that if Bernhard caught you enjoying yourself she would shut you down in a heartbeat," she writes. "She'd rather keep us at bay. I didn't mind that, though; in fact, I preferred the distance that the Booth afforded to the faux intimacy of the Westbeth, where the show originated" (113).

A reviewer of the stage production of *Without You I'm Nothing* notes that "the most touching moments [are] Ms. Bernhard's embroidered autobiographical monologues in which it [is] difficult to distinguish between fact and invention" (Holden "Performer"). This equivocation is clearly an informing pleasure and threat in the aforementioned offerings and undercuttings of the "real." As Gray argues, however, it is most often the case that spectator and critic want to "touch" and to "know" the female performer (140). And this desire is surely inflected by the status of the body as truth of the woman, and sex as the "problem of truth" of the body (Foucault, *History* 56).

Notably, then, one offering that Bernhard does not make in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* is the lesbian confession. After all, a lesbian real is clearly at work in this performance, as either a lesbian real, in the sense of where "[w]hat is socially peripheral is often symbolically central," or as lesbian camp (Stallybrass and White 32). "[Courtney

¹³ It is in this sense, perhaps, that Franklin claims: "Bernhard has made a big deal out of being a downtown

Love and I] went to a party," says Bernhard. "The papparazzi were there so Courtney was trying to kiss me on the mouth." At the Booth, this line was met with heavy silence; in San Fransisco, with lots of laughs. In Bernhard's riffs on Lilith Fair, she complains about Sarah McLachlan's relentless hugging and, as if horrified, she says: "and then Jewel came up from behind, and surprised me," and then falls silent. This got immediate laughs in San Fransisco, but met a more inert chemistry at the Booth, where the laughs took a few moments, during which, presumably, scenes precipitated. Either as misrecognized real or as lesbian camp, or "depoliticized entertainment" (Bennett 173), the "single meaning (the lesbian one)" is in this instance the totalizing form of Bernhard's address (Auslander, *Presence* 166).

The palpability of the lesbian "meaning" here, to me as much as to anyone, is evidence that this identificatory offering is one that Bernhard cannot disruptively make while withholding herself as confrontational other, because it has been made already for her (and elsewhere, by her) *as* that figure. "Women who do break through into comedy," notes Martin and Segrave, "are branded with all sorts of unpleasant [sic] labels, such as strident, dyke, or frustrated" (20). It seems a small wonder then that, in a representative field where lesbians "provide comic relief" (Davy 45), some lesbian comics note that "the conjunction of acknowledging their comic abilities and acknowledging their homosexuality seems to be a natural outgrowth of similar kinds of freedom" (Walker 161). Bernhard's refusal to thus confess is therefore in the same order of her refusal of a requisite eruption which functions either as a constitutive outside or as an identificatory

["real"] chick, but Broadway suits her more than she might want to admit" (113).

guarantee, even if, in the absence of the latter, Walton observes a general

"dissatisfaction about Bernhard's public image among lesbian audiences" (244).¹⁴

It is precisely because she is seen to have already made this confession that Bernhard's withholding of it produces another sign, the bisexual one. Fuchs reads the bisexual sign in *Without You I'm Nothing* as the film's "most profound 'risk,' for the identity yet remains elusive, different, invisible and unknowable [...] 'a sign of transgression, ambiguity, and mutability' that challenges 'all notions of fixed, immutable identities'" (204). But it seems to me that, in this particular context, the very extent to which this *is* sign—sign of the truth, however ambiguous, of the visible body—marks the containment of that mutability to the body of the performing other, and offers in the sighting of that body "the erotic logic [and pleasure] of ambivalence" (Butler, *Excitable* 95).

In this sense, the extent to which Bernhard has "made a career out of artful obfuscation" is a measure of the workings of this sign and its pleasures (Williams 148). I would argue then that Bernhard's refusal even to offer and to undercut this particular identification (though she has done so elsewhere) is to circumvent the way in which such movements, rather than troubling the site of the sign, could emphasize it rather as the sign of a "sexual orientation of choice" (Picardie). In other words, as Pellegrini notes, the "aestheticization of queerness, its reduction to a look and a manner of dress one can take on or put off at will picks up on the popular cant of homosexuality as a 'lifestyle' choice and thereby contains the threatening difference of queerness" (52). Bernhard, flashing the

¹⁴ The "guarantee" is as much a fantasy in some lesbian identity projects as it is in hegemonic ones. Aston writes that "[t]he lesbian subject on and off the stage offers the possibility of a radical challenge to the

cover of an issue of *Newsweek* which features the photo of a drag queen "turned" heterosexual, chirps: "Hi, I'm gay. What do you do?"

Finally, Bernhard's offerings and undercuttings of an identificatory real proffer the fantasy-real of a self-violating performance in the confession, but withhold self-revelatory "presence" in terms of self-descriptive content. In other words, the enactment of interpellative injury is at once a display of the subject and of its "founding moment," and the "mark interpellation makes is not descriptive, but inaugurative" (Butler, *Psychic* 3; *Excitable* 33). Crucially, then, Bernhard's confession is insistently that of vulnerability. "My humor is not angry'," Bernhard argues in a 1990 interview. "If you think it's sarcastic, then you're missing the vulnerability. I think my work is more about honesty than it is about anger" (cited in Taylor 141). She is thus, in the context of this interpellative scene, "vulnerable in a specifically linguistic sense to a social life of language that exceeds the purview of the subject who speaks" (Butler, *Excitable* 87). And her confession is precisely an assertion of potentiality, the effective force of self-violation's "violent artistry" (Butler, *Subjection* 76).

Credibility Problems

Bernhard's treacherous confessions are unsettling, but it is her "straight-forward" singing that most deeply disrupts the comic-sense of *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* (Harvey). Comedy, especially the "outrageous" sort with which Bernhard is identified, is a marked

dominant representations of gender, because she has no investment in a gender economy based on sexual difference" (102). Jagose terms this "the impossible dream of exteriority" (2).

exercise of subjective authority; singing, when it is not comedic, is a putatively feminine display. In the evolution of stand-up comedy, Martin and Segrave write, "[i]t was ultimately the aggressive, manipulative, and sociopolitical aspects of humor that set it apart from singing or dancing" (19). Singing, in other words, conventionally figures as a woman comic's lapse into feminine charm in a performance more properly about (male-identified) wit. As such, the "lapse" implies a feminine failure to measure up to the subject position: "[m]ale comics almost never sing [...]. Perhaps some comediennes retain the singing format because they are still reluctant to devote themselves to comedy" (Martin and Segrave 310). Since Bernhard's performances cite that showgirl who is "the product of a tradition of 'entertaining exhibitionism'" (Stuart 2), it is telling that one reviewer of Bernhard's stand-up act complains that she "flirted with entertainment only on a few of the songs she sang" (Kogan). For Bernhard, singing is a subjective disruption. When, in her stand-up act, "she did some of the songs straight without any gags or impression involved [...] [t]his tended to make her act choppy, breaking the comic mood" (Martin and Segrave 412). In other words, the introduction of song here is not a comic failure but a failure of the comic. Bernhard's songs amount to a kind of self-violating relinquishing of subjective authority, and as such they are nominally nonsensical. In other words, as Bernstein wonders, "[w]hy *is* Sandra Bernhard singing?"

The question is not begged by every sort of singing, however. After all, Bernhard's outrageous comedy is approvingly identified with "the hostile but affirmative energies of rock" (Paglia 140), and she has often performed her stand-up material in rock venues (Indiana, "Sandra" 29). In other words, the "charismatic ideology promoted by rock" also produces the outrageous woman (comic) subject: disruptive, carnivalesque,

male-identified, not necessarily "pretty," but requisitely "real" (Auslander, *Presence* 161). Not surprisingly, Bernhard's voice is most often described as "the big, surprisingly supple, lived-in voice of a vintage rocker" (Marks); she is exactly the sort of subject who might be expected to display "a big, honed if not particularly musical voice," and in that display to offer the promise of the pleasure of a putative encounter with the real (Harvey). Bernhard herself alludes to this figure. "Just give me an old-fashioned, sweaty big-titty bitch of rock and roll," she shouted, and the appeal of the figure was clearly evident in the audience's cheers. (Oh, sorry—that was just me.) "Now when these women wrote a lyric and sang a song," she exhorts, "you know they had lived it. They wrote it, they snorted it, they fucked it, they lived it." That "emergence" here should be so regulated by the normative fantasy of an eruptive, visible, and overwhelmingly present real means that Bernhard, "one of the leading 'rock-'n'-roll' stand-up comics of the 1980's" (Moritz 15), should necessarily seem to bring "a kind of honesty to pop that probably could only have come out of having done stand-up comedy for so long" (Holden "Sandra"). Of course, that Bernhard casts this figure nostalgically alludes to its ideological, or produced and productive nature, or its status as "a past that has only ideological reality" (Stewart, *On Longing* 23). And if the ideology promoted by rock thereby re-centralizes the hegemonic field of representation, then surely in this particular sense hegemony must be one of the biggest rock promoters around.

The precise question here then is, why is Sandra Bernhard singing not rock but "hegemonic pop music," that "insidious soundtrack" which represents and reproduces hetero-patriarchal cultural reality-effects (Auslander, *Presence* 161)? Bernhard notes that, in her stand-up act, "[t]he music was really separate" (cited in Indiana, "Sandra" 29). In

I'm Still Here...Damn It! however, as in earlier shows, Bernhard moves her persona toward a usefully hybrid figure, a discontinuous subject, where "in cabaret, the conflation of the comic agent and woman is unsettling" (Carlson 225). This unsettling conflation is resolved in Bernhard's case, however, by that representational frame which situates her as resoundingly male-identified. I would suggest, then, that Bernhard's exercises in "hegemonic pop" work toward re-distressing and re-introducing difference to that conflated figure; to reproduce, in other words, a hybrid which refers to mutually exclusive identificatory scenes—the "worlds of comedy and 'serious' popular music [...] [which] have rarely interacted" (Holden, "Sandra"). In other words, Bernhard's singing amounts to a *presumption* to the mainstream feminine. She is once again a cross-over figure, but this time, as a "pretender to prominence" in pop music (Auslander, *Presence* 156). She is passing, in other words; she's the eruptive "television personality crossing over as singer" (Herndon). And if this movement seems strained—as Holden notes, Bernhard's "shrill, wobbly rendition of 'People' [suggests] that the role's musical demands may be far beyond her"—I would argue that the strain is most importantly an ideological one ("Performer").

The stage is literally set in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* for Bernhard's assumption of this singer's position, being arranged, as in the show "Giving Till It Hurts," to "[bear] more than a passing resemblance to a full-blown concert" (Bernstein). But if this is the setting for a singer, or for that joker as "initiant" or "[person] undergoing rituals of transition," this is crucially not a scene of the initiated but of the transitive (Douglas, "Jokes" 107). In other words, this is not the tableau of a hegemonically proper feminine

display. Insofar as the tendency to read Bernhard's performance in her face now extends to reading it in her voice, she is again an ambiguous figure. As Bernhard says: "I have a very emotional voice. It's not a *pretty* voice" (cited in Bernstein 84). Thus, as a figure who is seen to relinquish the mark of comic authority and to move toward a default figuration, Bernhard is effectively a kind of linguistic loose cannon, that joker who "[i]n the symbolisation of the social structure, [has] let go [her] moorings and [is] temporarily displaced" (Douglas, "Jokes" 107).

With the (comic) subject thus unmoored and its trajectory established, Bernhard ostentatiously foregrounds the labour of her particular assumption of the feminine. She frequently steps away from the mike to a nearby table, for liquids and throat lozenges, and the move is always pointed. "I'm lubricating my throat," she announces, and, "I need something 'curiously strong'" (in reference to Altoids ads). At the Booth, she also appeared tired and sounded stuffed up, and constantly pulled away from the mike to cough. Bernhard's insistence on displaying the trials of the voice in these "breaks" suggests that the category she is assuming here is neither natural nor donned but worked, and not definitively so (Bennett 150). In referring this way to the voice's injury or potential for injury, Bernhard's performance becomes a putative display of "*controlled discomfort*" or "the self-regulated and modest suffering of work" (Scarry 171). This, in the context of a display of interpellation, is work in that "posture of the self bent against the self" which characterizes the precipitating subject (Butler, *Psychic* 13). And although all of these gestures and the accompanying commentary were repeated in the San Francisco show (except for her cold!) the fact that throughout the show Bernhard otherwise stays very still and close to the mike emphasizes that these literal asides are the

"real" stage action. Like Bernhard's catalogue of labours in preparing a "presentable" performing body—"shower, shampooing, shaving, sweating, douching"—these glimpses of the disciplined voice, as it were, constitute in themselves an interpellative drama.

To display work in this way, as an intimate and *strained* relation between "aversive expenditure" and linguistic "restoration," is also to infect the scene with the spectre of work's potential failure (Scarry 318). This allusion is curiously elaborated with an apparently unscripted problem with Bernhard's microphone. She intones grandly: "I am... an actress, I am a performer, I am a SUPERSTAR," to much applause. But she continues plainly, and complainingly: "then why do I have to adjust my own damn mike stand?" The laughter here marked the audience's pleasure in the comic undermining of Bernhard's "star" designation and in her brief restoration as either comically inept or as "complainer," momentarily put-upon and thwarted in her emergence by a "real" material failure of production. Theoretically, this failure alludes to a certain subjective emergency, a "moment of failed and failing artifice" (Scarry 318). But here, the glitch in the seamless production was an apparently enjoyable crisis. At the Booth, where she not only delivered the line but fiddled with the mike stand, making this appear to be both a "real" (material, and not performed) *and* comic (visual, and contained to the performing other) problem, this moment provoked not only laughter but applause. The "problem" was scripted, after all: it was repeated in the San Francisco show. But here Bernhard did not adjust the mike, nor did the audience applaud—without bodily elaboration, the line sounded scripted, and not particularly comically so. Without the collusion of the vexed body, in other words, there is here neither "problem" nor joke.

Of course, Bernhard's voice is implicated in this failure; the microphone is metonymic of her voice; its stand is draped with material that resembles her dress. There are nominally high stakes in a vocal emergency in the interpellative scene, for the voice, as either "the locus of [male-identified] power" or of a competent display of the feminine, is the seat of the subject category and the site of this subject's transition (Scarry 51). Bernhard, as a transitive joker figure, is at risk "until [she has] gone through the whole ritual of redefinition" (Douglas, "Jokes" 107), and the danger is linguistic placelessness, for "[t]o move outside of the domain of the speakability is to risk one's status as a subject" (Butler, *Excitable* 133). Where this emergency is marked as comic, however, it does not constitute danger per se, for as Douglas writes, "the joker is not exposed to danger. He has a firm hold on his own position in the [social] structure" ("Jokes" 107).

But that's not really ever true for the woman comic. The woman comic is a figure already out of position, and, "while male comedians may be shouted down and told they're not funny, the audience rarely challenges their right to be a comedian at all" (Gray 146). In the instance of a male comic's entrance to the mainstream, as in the case of Jerry Seinfeld, for example, such transitions—from stand-up, to television, to ads for American Express—all constitute direct, proper and seamless movements of an assured subject.¹⁵ Also, I suppose, the woman comic, at best a visibly tenuous subject, could never really sell a sit-com with the conceit that "nothing happens," insofar as she, as comic authority, is always already "happening" as the primary comic event. In other words, as stand-up Kit Hollerbach says, "[i]f a man goes on stage and bombs, it's OK and he's one of the guys; if a woman fails, it's tragedy" (cited in Banks 217). The male comic is simply

¹⁵ Thanks to Susan Bennett for suggesting Jerry Seinfeld as a useful contrast.

exposed as a non-comic subject; her exposure, on the other hand, is of another order, for if she is neither comic subject nor the "competent" feminine precluded in and by that figure, she isn't any hegemonically recognized category at all. The risk in Bernhard's display of an assumption of the feminine, in other words, is not exactly its putative potential for recentralizing a hegemonic feminine. Rather, the risk is precisely in not getting "there," in relinquishing a (comic) subjective authority and failing to otherwise inhabit the alternative linguistic category.¹⁶ In other words, in a scene where all she has is linguistic status, to be neither markedly comic nor "artistic" implies a resolute failure of identity.

With the spectre of this sort of failure raised in and by Bernhard's drama of misrecognition, there is a desire to read critical difference, or the air of the joke, where as Freud writes, "the jest made by humour is not the essential thing. It has only the value of a preliminary. The main thing is the intention" ("Humour" 166). Critical difference would signify that, as Bernhard enacts an injurious symbolic display, she means it differently, or, does not believe what she is signifying. It is in this sense that Bernhard insists, "'I'll always be a commentator as well as an entertainer'" (cited in Bernstein). For example, in the case of Bernhard's appearance in *Playboy*, she says that "'being able to write the accompanying piece'" was crucial (cited in Hunt).¹⁷

The comic mark, in other words, casts failure as a knowing, critical gesture. In *Without You I'm Nothing*, Bernhard's delivery of the song "Me and Mrs. Jones" apparently "shades into something less fictional, but then goes over the top as Bernhard's

¹⁶ As Bernhard might say, on getting "there": "I never feel vulnerable [...] [b]ecause I demand respect, and my [high] heels back me up" ("Why 192).

voice threatens to become an ambulance siren on the signature line" (Indiana, "Read").

This is emergency, obviously, but a markedly hyperbolic, comic and knowing one.

Bernhard, Indiana insists, "has a memorable voice that she pushes beyond its range at strategic moments, undermining naïve readings of any particular sequence" ("Read"). In this sort of musical gesture, as in her spoken performance, Bernhard "uses her voice to convey humor rather than jokes" (Martin and Segrave 412). Alternatively, the comic body can be offered as mark. Again in *Without You I'm Nothing*, "[t]he earnestness of [a] song's message [...] evaporates as Bernhard, 'acting the song,' glides into a pose straight from a fitness center ad" (Indiana, "Read").

In *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* Bernhard refuses this bodily reassurance throughout, with an exception at the Booth, when she just once lets the faintest look of archness cross her face, to the least equivocal laughter of the night. And, except in her celebrity impersonations, the musical gestures are similarly "bewilderingly uninflected" (Indiana, "Read"). Rather than "the power of women's humor when it becomes impossible to overlook" then, this is perhaps the power of humour when it becomes impossible to find (Barreca, *Untamed* 31). In other words, Bernhard's "'[i]s she serious?' renditions" (Kort 49) function as a kind of "nonsense operation by which a riddle question is turned into an ordinary discourse question, or a joke into an 'unremarkable' true story," which is "both a transformation from one domain to another [here, a residing in transition] and an articulation of the boundary between the two domains" (Stewart, *Nonsense* 89). This simultaneous withholding and foregrounding of that limit which regulates the

¹⁷ "I've done way too much work for the money they paid me here," Bernhard writes in *Playboy*, referring to the accompanying photos. "Where were we darling?" ("Not Just" 76).

representative field effectively makes the spectator responsible for placing (producing) the scene in relation to it.

The problem for the spectator here is that this ambiguous figure is not "beyond category" so much as overwhelmingly referential to it (Douglas, *Purity* 35). In other words, as one critic complains: "[i]t's not that her voice is bad—she can actually carry a tune—it's just that it's not good. *Amateurish* would be the right word" (Herndon). It is exactly Bernhard's *lack* of a hyperbolic failure to approximate the feminine here that distresses, for the performance is a palpable citation of the regulatory power of these terms without being a carnivalesque or comic liberation from them. It is difficult to know, then, if these citations are "constructs inviting our laughter, [or] problems with which we [have] to deal" (Gray 150).

The mark, in other words, serves to assure the spectator of his or her position in relation to the limit of whatever real resides here. The spectator, thus, longs for that mark: "we watch and listen carefully to see if this is all an exquisite sendup" (Christon 23). But neither marked failure nor unequivocal success is evident. Bernhard as (comic) subject, it must be insisted, is a pretender to or "forger" of the feminine, yet she is an "expert" one, one who displays a "tempermental affinity [with the 'original'] and the skills of undetectable approximation" (Christon 24). "Approximation" *must* operate here because there is a joke sensed in the scene, the joke of a subject in drag as it were, which is nominally comic, in the sense of its degradation of a subject to the feminine. In other words, if there is a "whopping credibility problem" here, it is precisely that of the feminine subject (Herndon). If the male-identified Bernhard is a good-enough copy of the subject, the feminine is definitely a poor one, and displeasure with this scene strictly *as*

performance is precisely an unease with that subject's disjunction. Bernhard, as one reviewer counsels, "ought to bag the indulgence [or ruse] of trying to sing artistically [as the feminine], and fall back on her [real, male-identified] personality" (Herndon). The mark that would recuperate this display as performance would be that mark of critical knowing, "[b]ut Bernhard never drops a sardonic clue. Her comedic hem is perfectly straight" (Christon 23). In other words, the crisis here is in being forced to recognize Bernhard's apparent misrecognition: she really seems to believe she is a woman!

The implied subjective failure in song makes that failure *explicitly* a failure of artifice, and exposes the putative original as sign, in the sense that "in the phallic order of patriarchal culture and in its theory, woman is unrepresentable except as representation," and a hyperbolic one at that (de Lauretis 20). As Bernhard insists about mainstream pop: "I can't make fun of this stuff, I just have to *do it*" (cited in Ward 12). For Bernhard to succeed as a mainstream singer in this context then would be to perfectly inhabit the sign of the hegemonic feminine, to be "woman as icon" (Bennett 82), to be seamlessly "decorative" in the manner of "the contemporary showgirl [who] is a 'simulation' of herself, an icon that is reduced to the signs which attest to her existence" (Stuart 7, 210). A reviewer of Bernhard's 1994 stage production *Excuses for Bad Behaviour, Part I* complains about the "utterly generic support" of the band (Herndon). In *I'm Still Here... Damn It!*, the "generic" character of the music was played up, as it were, by the band's sudden "lapse" upon Bernhard's exit into a series of frenetic solos, and the show was thus resoundingly marked as a performance *toward* musical "conventionality." And, since the stage arrangements emphasized the band's supporting role, musical attention was

focussed especially on Bernhard herself, and on the risk she took there, not of being "merely conventional" but of failing to be successfully so (Auslander, *Presence* 147).

With intimations of failure so ostentatiously installed here—by reference to Bernhard's putatively "ambiguous" voice, to its potential for injury and its vulnerability to material failures—the spectator is poised to consider, and thus regards (hears) the possibilities engendered by a voice apparently "right on the *edge* of being bad" (Lewis). It is in this sense that, as she writes, Franklin is less interested in where Bernhard's "coming from" than in "where she's headed" (113). The implied scene of crisis is not a failure of voice—Bernhard's singing, cedes a reviewer, "has its potency"—but it is a failure of language (Kogan 12). As a reviewer of Bernhard's 1992 stage production *Giving Till It Hurts* rues, "when [Bernhard] tries to belt, be it a pop soul song or a Broadway show tune, her voice breaks into a thin, desperate screech" (Holden, "Performer"). The crisis, in other words, is in glimpsing the spectre of a receding subject, a crisis all the more marked in those "belting" numbers because "the more dramatic the appearance, the more disturbing the disappearance" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 153). Bernhard's voice never did actually fail in the shows I attended, but, as I've argued, the threat of failure need not be actualized to effect force or indeed for the scene itself to play out. Rather, "the dread of threat lies in its deferred fulfillment" (Hartman 157).

And thus, Bernhard's implied failure to embody a linguistic category is not a scene of utterly revoked or "refused" presence (Auslander, *Presence* 163). She is visibly present and subjectively so, thanks both to the resonance of her comic authority—her lingering retributive threat, and the persistence of that hope, however undercut, which is incited by her avowedly confessional pose—and to her ostentatious references to psychic

presence. She pours drinks from a liquor bottle, as if to "loosen up." When the audience cheers, Bernhard then chides, as if disgusted, that this is "only" caramel water. And she insists, when she talks about being disagreeably "high," that "even when I am fucked up I am totally in control."¹⁸

Crucially, then, Bernhard's gestures toward presence, disappearing, and loss are not organized strictly according to a field of the visible real, and the scene of the receding subject is both psychically and visually occluded. Thus, in the allusion to a subject who is visually present and yet fails to completely "appear," a rent in the visual ground of the subject is provoked. This performance has "too much substance" *and* "too little" (Phelan, *Mourning* 42)—the crisis, in other words, is that of the (bodily) ego, a crisis for which, as for performance in general, "the referent is always the agonizingly relevant body of the performer" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 150). Bernhard's body is thus the site of an imagined tableau that is profoundly threatening for offering neither a verifiable subjective real nor a clean break from it, which vacillates between being a matter of matter-proper and of matter out of form. Douglas writes, on matter "out of place":

first [its pieces] are recognisably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away. At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits if whatever it was they came from, hair or food or wrappings. This is the stage at which they are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence [...] In the end, all identity is gone [...] So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous. (Douglas, *Purity* 160)

In other words, as the title *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* suggests, this display of interpellative injury works in the signifying order of physical pain, where "to express

¹⁸ Bernhard often emphasizes this in print interviews. "I hate [being high]," she says in one. "I like being really lucid. I like being in control!" (Haynes 17).

pain one must *both* objectify its felt characteristics *and* hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics" (Scarry 17). The scene, in other words, is no longer comic in the spirit of Bergson's automaton, whose repetition "is no longer life, it is automatism in life and imitating it" (19). Rather, this is the very (scandalous) animation of ideology, where the subject is not merely an "ideological mirage" (Jameson 63) but, on the contrary, a subject who "acts insofar as he [sic] is acted by" ideology (Althusser 159), and whose body's very form "is actively produced [or revoked] by the junction and disjunction of symbolic domains" (Stallybrass and White 192).¹⁹

Exit Wounds

Bernhard's theatres of misrecognition—her confessional attitude and its invitation to dangerous identifications; the intimations of failure in her own assumption of a mainstream feminine voice—are replayed in her dramatization of (failing) race performatives, where she pointedly enacts the "fundamental dependence [of whiteness] on the 'other' for its definition of 'self'" (Walton 251). Bernhard installs this identificatory scene by inviting another performer on stage. "This is Soumaya [Akaaboune] who's from Morocco," she says, "welcome her." Bernhard introduces Akaaboune as "an amazing percussionist;" Akaaboune is so palpably placed in the scene as Bernhard's functional other, however, that someone who saw this show on another night complained to me that she didn't know why Akaaboune was on stage at all, unless she was Bernhard's girlfriend. If "[o]ur desire for the object's return constitutes our subjectivity," Akaaboune clearly

¹⁹ See Butler's *Bodies That Matter*.

stands in as a passport to this lost real (Phelan, "Reciting" 20). "Morocco," sighs Bernhard, "was a country that always cried out—come back, come back—as if I'd been there in a thousand lifetimes," and it was Akaaboune (stand-up, percussionist, *and* travel agent) who "set up" this trip.

Bernhard sits on a stool and pulls Akaaboune to stand before her. "Soumaya," she says to the audience, "is the Phyllis Diller of Morocco." "Tell a Moroccan joke" Bernhard suggests, and Akaaboune does so (perhaps) in Arabic. Akaaboune does not speak at any other point; Bernhard embodies not only that "silent spectator [who] dominates and controls the [spectatorial] exchange" but also, more precisely, that imagined spectator of her own who, in the context of a strictly regulated transgressive scene, ventriloquizes an effectively non-linguistic but crucially responsive discourse of the other (Phelan, *Unmarked* 163). Here, I suppose (as this is "Phyllis Diller") the compelled joke is that "self-deprecating" one that Bernhard withheld from her own stand-up material in favour of an outrageous attitude. The eruptive other, however, is also ventriloquized (elsewhere). "Janet [Jackson] has gone into a deep moment. My hat is off to her, honey. She's working through some shit, expressing herself," Bernhard says, admiringly. "I put her CD on a few weeks ago. I was vacuuming, dusting, and all of a sudden I hear 'and your pussy's gonna swell up and explode'. Did that come out of my speakers? Cuz I've said some crazy shit but Miz Jackson, you're *nasty*." Here, Bernhard plays white propriety as a "subject position from which one introjects fantasized black otherness," and which (re)produces, projects, and articulates the desirous discourse of an other (Walton 254).

Bernhard presents this productive scene as a compulsively repetitive one. "Just when you think you've seen the last lost native tribe, *National Geographic* will find a

new one for your ass," she says (to much laughter). "They will forge a river, they will climb a mountain, they will dig in a bat-infested cave, but they'll find you a new lost native tribe." But then, "why is it when I get half-way through my *National Geographic* I get sidetracked by my *Allure*?" In other words, whiteness' reproduction of an other is a narcissistic operation, and marks a moment in the career of an identity (ego) which must thus constantly precipitate, for it is "the turn from the object to the ego [which] produces the ego, which substitutes for the object lost" (Butler, *Subjection* 168). This circuit is at once psychic, social, and material—or commodified. Bernhard lights some sweetgrass and waves it about. "I just want to lighten up the vibe, I want to take all the negativity out of the room. We're going to get deep into a Native American moment right now," she says. And then: "Don't you feel psychically refreshed? Of course you do." In other words, incorporation and recirculation of a lost object works "to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss" (Butler, *Subjection* 134). Bernhard, however, marks the failure of narcissistic substitution in her "Native American moment" when, chanting, her voice (as Indiana says) goes over the top. In another respect, as Pellegrini writes, this is also to enact "the conditions under which so-called 'minority' cultures become visible to 'mainstream'—which is to say: 'white' and 'straight'—America [in which a] leading condition for the subaltern's visibility is reauthorization, via a commodifying exchange, by hegemonic culture" (51).

"We bought it all," Bernhard notes of Morocco, "and we shipped it all home," which surely alludes to her own set's interioresque lighting, carpets, and tapestries. These are the furnishings, then, of a confessional real that is explicitly borrowed from an other's implied elsewhere. In other words, Bernhard's confession and profession in the song

"God is Good" is the gesture of a self-identified but not self-identical Jew, who speaks through and in conjunction with an other (miming a Moslem call to prayer, with back-up vocals by Akaaboune). Bernhard's self-revelatory confession, then, is cast as a melancholic incorporation of the other—an insufficient one: "my mind was all over the place"—and a note of loss is introduced to the scene, insofar as "[m]elancholia refuses to acknowledge loss, and in this sense 'preserves' its lost objects as psychic effects" (Butler, *Psychic* 182). On the other hand, this is also a parodic performance of whiteness, in the sense that whiteness stands as "the historical agent of colonialization and cultural appropriation" (Pellegrini 60).

Bernhard's identificatory "trip" then is resoundingly a "story of missed encounters" (Silverman 3). Her misrecognitions become palpable under the rough hands of the other (or, the Moroccan masseuse): "yeah," she exclaims, "I enjoyed 'Midnight Express' too, but get me the fuck out of here!" The film "Midnight Express" was set in Turkey, not Morocco, but Bernhard's misrecognition here points at once to the categorical nature of identificatory relations, to American imperialism, and to the commodity-logic of "the sexualization of racial difference" (Pellegrini 5).²⁰ This is the one moment in the show that Akaaboune actually breaks her demure manner; she laughs hard at Bernhard here, silently. In the sense that "we can only catch ourselves in the act of becoming subject when we see ourselves as if through the other's 'I,'" this moment is quite palpably an implicative display (Pellegrini 11).

²⁰ Thanks to Susan Bennett for drawing this to my attention.

I return, then, to Bernhard's assumption of the voice of the mainstream feminine. Insofar as music operates as a "direct address" in the context of theatrical world (Carlson 223), Bernhard is her spectator's aural other, and the interpellative drama is itself an interpellation, an "acoustic mirror" (Silverman 40). Or, as Bernhard reminds the audience at the end of the show, gesturing toward the band: "they've worked so hard... for YOU." And so, although the implied failing of the performer's voice is a spectacle, an occasion of "[e]mergencies [as] entertainment," the spectacle is at once a crisis for the spectator, for the threat of musical failure is the threat of (non)address (Bernhard, "Thrills" 29). It is here that "the centrality of the spectator as subject of the drama" is disagreeably intelligible to the spectator (Bennett 1). For Bernhard to have implicated the efficacies of identificatory reproductions of others, as I have described above, "in such a way that the stand-ins come to reveal *that the kernel of the drama of the Other is that the Other is always a stand-in*," is to inflect her own performance as exactly that which stands in between the spectator and an already absent other (Phelan, *Mourning* 330).

Thus, Bernhard's crisis provokes "a domino effect of losses" (Bennett 49), or "the traumatization of the ones who listen" (Caruth 10). Here the importance of the occluded scene of disappearing or "active vanishing" becomes clear, as it were (Phelan, *Unmarked* 19). For it is not the scene of absence which incites proliferative disorder, but rather that laborious disappearing—the space of a "critical period of decay and degradation" (Bataille 67) in which identificatory relations become palpable, in "the withering composition of [the other's] form of relation to us" (Phelan, *Mourning* 41).

In other words, the spectator's anticipation of the failure of the performing other, "an ear-fear connected with overhearing," is as a stumbling onto and a consideration of

the subject's primal scene (Hartman 143).²¹ In this constitutive moment, the desire for and loss of the primary object are both foreclosed and ungrieved. Bernhard's voice, on the other hand, "makes us aware of a sound we are prevented from hearing" (Silverman 40), for although its implied failure does not restore the primary object, it does restore its loss, and the foreclosed knowledge of a previous desire for it, which is knowledge that, as in the order of trauma, "is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (Caruth 8). In other words, the irksomeness of this performance is borne of its interference with *necessary* misrecognitions, its short-circuiting of "an unknowability without which the subject cannot endure" (Butler, *Psychic* 24).

Bernhard's failure as substitution is implicative of the reliability of representation in general as a "surrogate with which to cover the absent real" (Silverman 5). That is to say, "[w]ords *are* jokes" (Hartman 133). In San Francisco, at some point of lukewarm audience response, Bernhard declares: "You're a really great audience. It's been flopsy here all week. Blow-sy. Blouse-y!" Here the failure is her own, and it is feminine, but the implication is that "the position of 'woman' within language is open to 'any speaking subject whatever' precisely because it is 'not all'" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 18). This knowledge is traumatic, insofar as "the expectation [is] that a self can be defined or constituted by words, if they are direct enough" (Hartman 123). At the Booth, Bernhard takes one of her numerous breaks for "refreshment" and muses, "Drink, drank, drunk," and she wonders aloud which is correct. This gets no verbal response, nor any laughter, and she rejoins, as if fed up: "I've worn out your ass. Here's \$100—go see your therapist."

²¹ In this respect, Hartman writes, "the ear, as a psychic organ, is at least as vulnerable as the eye" (123).

In failing language lies a certain decomposition of the Subject, a rupture of that ideological contract where ideology "*subjects* the subjects to the Subject, while giving them in the Subject in which each subject can contemplate its own image (present and future) the *guarantee* that this really concerns them" (Althusser 168). This failure engenders Bernhard's most irrecoverable transgression, if she is thus transgressive after all. For, as Bataille notes in another context, "if death prevails over a sovereign whose exalted position might seem to be a guarantee against it, that sense of rupture gets the upper hand and disorder knows no bounds" (Bataille 66). Perhaps in this respect, to the extent that she is that showgirl who is "a cypher on to which her audiences [project] profound social anxieties, and a barometer indicating her era's concerns" (Stuart 2), Bernhard restates the unconscious "consensus" of a post-sovereign culture (Douglas, "Jokes" 107). The decomposition of the Subject threatens the spectating subject with an "absence of appropriate categories that might act as 'perpetual stays' in moments of [psychic] emergency" (Scarry 279). Suddenly volatile, the spectator as subject is "one who has known—somehow, somewhere—what it is *not* to have that standing" (Butler, *Psychic* 118). And thus, as in the order of trauma, "it is not only the moment of the event, but the passing out of it that is traumatic; [...] survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis" (Caruth 9).

Douglas writes that the joker is also a mourner ("Jokes" 107). The "mourning" of this joker is clearly a sanctioned and proper ritual; its gesture is transitional in the spirit of humour's "grandeur and elevation" which, Freud says, indicates "the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability [in which] [t]he ego

refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality" ("Humour" 162). This humour, in other words, alludes to loss in its refusal of it.

This joker, then, is a figure of the melancholic, in whom "the object is not only lost, but that loss itself is lost, withdrawn and preserved in the suspended time of psychic life" (Butler, *Psychic* 183). Bernhard's phone jokes in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* are paradigmatic of this melancholic humour. Acting out the melancholic's incorporation of and recovery of (and from) the otherwise unanswerable disappearance of the object, Bernhard declares: "God forbid someone should hang up on your ass, it's the end of the world. I'm going to star-69 the motherfucker." And what would the subject like to have said to the lost object, and now can, in the replayed scene (Butler, *Psychic* 182)? "Now we have caller ID, for the ultimate in passive-aggressive behaviour. 'Don't pick up that phone—I want to see who it is. Oh it's Joyce? FUCK her—I never want to speak to her again'." Butler notes the subject's disavowal of ever having loved "that way," which is to say, having loved in order to survive, as if "indiscriminately" (Butler, *Psychic* 8). Snaps Bernhard, caustically, *discriminately*: "I'm waiting for caller *IQ*." All of these jokes provoked huge laughter (as did generally any of the rare moments of "disruptive" language, as if in relief at Bernhard's citations of eruptive, taboo-breaking comedy).

Elsewhere, however, Bernhard is clearly *not* a proper mourner (or joker). For example, in a review of 1994's *Excuses for Bad Behaviour, Part I* (which the reviewer overwhelmingly loathed), Bernhard's song "Innocence"—a "ritual of celebration and mourning for the gay community," he writes—is apparently the most exquisitely noxious of her "miscalculations" (Herndon). Although he grants that it is her "most ambitious song" (Bernhard's opportunity for grandeur and elevation, perhaps), her lyrics enrage.

"You made me beautiful," she sings to her dead friends, one a hairdresser, the other a manicurist (Bernhard, *Excuses*). "This is a peculiar sort of mourning," the reviewer sniffs, "looking into the polish of a casket and admiring one's own reflection. *Narcissim* [sic] is the word for it" (Herndon).

As Phelan notes in the context of ordeal art, there is perhaps something "obscenely arrogant" in this. Phelan qualifies, though, that this sort of self-dramatization "is also not the place of the performance" (*Unmarked* 161). Rather than make the "charge of individualism," I too would argue that the obnoxiousness of Bernhard's gesture does not lie exactly in its air of self-involvement, but rather, on the contrary, in its unbidden and unwelcome contamination of the spectator (Forte 266).

In other words, this posture is in the order of that narcissism which restores to the scene of identification not the lost object but the very (foreclosed) loss itself. This is narcissism as a "declarative" mourning (Butler, *Psychic* 170). "[G]rief and aggression are the foundations of narcissism," Phelan reminds us. "Narcissism emerges not out of an excess of self-love as is commonly assumed, but rather as a 'militant' acknowledgement of loss" (*Mourning* 130). The gesture is not, in other words, humour's denial of reality but is rather the aggressive display of grief and a living through it.

It is particularly here, I think, that Bernhard's staging of the drama of misrecognition and the ordeal of subjective failure most palpably embodies "the tensions between the more passive connotations of being a showgirl, that is being an object on display, and the more aggressive act of showing her ability to make us see, to make things manifest" (Stuart 7). That primary desire (and its loss) that is agreeably barred in the gestures of the melancholic joker here "shows itself through failure" (Phelan,

Unmarked 20). And the gesture's obnoxiousness is in its short-circuiting or catalysis of that "melancholy, the unfinished process of grieving, [which] is central to the formation of the identifications that form the ego" (Butler, *Psychic* 132).

Bernhard's performance of narcissistic grief is most explicit in her "Tough Times" routine, her meditation on "a year of [celebrity] losses." "I was fucked when [John Denver] died" she says to tentative giggles, "it took me right back to high school." She sighs: "for me personally, nothing touched me so much as the death of Gianni Versace. It was so random and violent."²² Bernhard-as-model declares: "it's been a terrible thing.. for ME." Bernhard as Naomi Campbell sings an elegy for Gianni Versace. "Gianni's gone, and we must go on," she wails. "On the runway," that is.

This entire piece was met with silence or a most equivocal laughter. If "laughter is more of a crisis than tears [...] [because it betrays a] threat to the autonomy of the spectator [which] is more urgent and serious," perhaps this reception is a measure of the piece's proliferative disruption (Girard 128). Spectators are companions in their spectatorship (Bennett 77), but here, as Franklin notes, "[t]he odd thing about responding to Bernhard is that it feels like the reverse of the old truism: laugh, and you laugh alone" (113). The audience in "Tough Times" still enjoyed an odd compact, then, but it was more the sociality of the traumatized or the pained, with "all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all the self-exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibility for comradeship" (Scarry 53). At the Booth, where people were flatly unresponsive to "Tough Times," Bernhard counselled: "laugh now, laugh later—we don't

²² As Bernhard writes elsewhere, "we all hope for a crisis to happen right next door, so that we can be gripped by something unexpected" ("Thrills" 29).

care." To hear this joke is to hear (and to have) trauma, and is "to have been chosen by it, before the possibility of mastering it with knowledge" (Caruth 10).

Bernhard clearly works here away from that safety which is the privilege of the joker toward the "dangers which threaten transgressors" (Douglas, *Purity* 3). Insofar as her performance "revives the primordial desire for the object only to disappoint that desire, and to reactivate the original trauma of its disappearance" (Silverman 9), she courts the disappointment and anger of those who, as a reviewer complains elsewhere, are (vainly) "expecting to be stirred [by the confrontational other] or at least witness a professional [display]" (Kogan).

Bernhard's "willingness [thus] [...] to tamper with 'the love'" seems most remarkable in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* in what Franklin calls the show's "spectacularly awful"—indeed, "almost unbearable"—final (encore) song (Franklin 113). In this number, if indeed this *is* the number that Franklin writes about, for she doesn't bring herself to describe it, Bernhard makes a clothing change from her sheer dress to flare pants, bra, and black afro wig. Unlike in the preceding bulk of the show, where she demurely attended to the microphone or gingerly stepped away to rest her voice, here Bernhard pouted and glared, ran up to the edge of the stage, mike in hand, and back to face the drummer, then back up to the front, throwing her fist in the air, singing hard and exhorting the audience to "fight the power," striking an attitude resonant of both blackface minstrelsy and camp.

As an encore, "Fight the Power" suggests theoretically that the number is a repetition of that which has preceded. On the other hand, its disruptive effect is evident both in Franklin's review and in the way the number was received in the San Francisco

show, where, in a venue more roomy than the Booth and with a centre aisle, so audience members were able to slip out without making too much of a show of themselves, many of the centre orchestra seats emptied out during the first few bars of the song. That this last number should be met with such sudden and marked spectatorial displeasure, when Bernhard's successes and "failures" have been thus far implicitly accepted, "authorized," and approved of *as* pleasure—Franklin's review suggests that she too enjoyed the show up to this point—seems to me to indicate that the disappointment here is not so much in Bernhard's own sudden failure as performer but is a disappointment of whatever indentificatory pleasure managed to persist throughout the previous body of the show (and performer) and its comic, revelatory, and musical offerings (however tenuous and intermittent they were). The song is not, after all, a sudden refusal of address, and even if these members of the audience were simply leaving early, "fight the power" was nevertheless a compelling enough identificatory invitation for some: the empty front seats were quickly occupied by a handful of young gay men, black and white, who were clearly enraptured by the performance, which was a measure of the extent to which the moment evoked a nexus of co-operating (race, gender, sex) performative practices.

In her reading of Bernhard's appropriative failures in the film *Without You I'm Nothing*, Pellegrini writes that blackness "appears to be the one identity category on display in the film Bernhard does not 'really' embody, because Jewishness or queerness or womanliness are somehow facts about Bernhard. She just is those things, right? This is appearance as ontology" (Pellegrini 61). I wonder, then, if Franklin's review reflects something of this logic. There was no marked failure here musically, insofar as

Bernhard's delivery didn't seem to be any more or less "musical" than the preceding numbers (which Franklin praises). It seems to me, then, that Franklin's rejection of the piece as inadequate as a performance per se is precisely a rejection of Bernhard's implied visual appropriative failure. And in a visual field, "the spectator can reject the representation as 'not about me'" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 11), a containment which seems evident in Franklin's praise of Bernhard's willingness, in this particular song, "to get her hands dirty with work [...] [to] not [be] afraid to be a fool herself" (113).

It seems to me that this displeasure is a measure of the spectator's sudden desire to *dis-identify* with a continuous scene of ambivalent identificatory pleasures, and its reactive air measures the extent to which the number engenders an escalated identificatory threat. Since the failure is nominally unmarked (not marked as musical failure, nor by any critically undercutting commentary), the scene is implicative of the spectator, in an obviously disagreeable way. In other words, as Bernhard argues about *Without You I'm Nothing*, these are gestures of the sort "'that might anger you because they remind you of your racism'" (cited in Chua 38).

For *this* imagined spectator to dis-identify in this particular instance—to join, in other words, the "fuck you phony white bitch" chorus that Bernhard installs earlier in the performance—is to speak as and through an other. And thus, in a funny way, if Bernhard's performance in "Fight the Power" is, as Pellegrini reads in *Without You I'm Nothing*, "a kind of whiteface [in which Bernhard] imitates and parodies whites impersonating blacks," then Bernhard's revolted spectator reproduces the very identificatory motions she enacts there (Pellegrini 53). And that Bernhard should expose this incorporative operation as a resounding failure is to make the spectator hear him or

herself speaking (thinking) thus, thinking the identificatory impossibilities and violences in that scene. It seems to me then that the displeasure here, to the extent that it *only* happens here, is exactly that "psyche's moralism [which] appears to be an index of its own thwarted grief and illegible rage" (Butler, *Psychic* 183).

"Fight the Power" is thus not really such a disruption after all, insofar as this encore reiterates the implication that spectatorial pleasure (or identity) depends on (dis)identification, and that (dis)identification is effected through an other. But the extent to which the scene cannot be recounted or acknowledged may be a measure of how irrecuperably disruptive that implication is. Franklin registers her disgust, but does not describe the song, and none of the other reviews I found even note it, which seems remarkable considering her reading and the performance's effect in the theatre.

As Phelan notes, primal scenes "cannot be endured very long" (*Unmarked* 5). Thus, although the imagined spectatorial crises I've been describing in this chapter are psychic—imagined by the spectator, and imagined by me—and thus for the most part are "invisible," perhaps they may be evidenced by those moments when, as one reviewer admits, "the show runs a little long" (Marks). I'm happy then, in this respect, to report that reviews of *I'm Still Here ... Damn It!* concur: "[t]he show's pitfalls come in song only: whether it's a heavy-handed 'call to prayer' or a classic rock cover that goes on way too long, it momentarily grinds the usually rapid-fire routine to a halt" (Burkes). An overwhelming presence may be evoked in musical address: for example, opera, de Certeau argues, "allows an enunciation to speak that in its most elevated moments detaches itself from statements, disturbs and interferes with syntax, and wounds or

pleasures, in the audience, those places in the body that have no language either" (de Certeau 162). It is then, I think, precisely to the extent that Bernhard's *failing* enunciation, in its most *degraded* moments, touches upon the spectator with intimations of loss that Bernhard is, most effectively and subversively, "no opera singer" (Picardie).

While trauma is and remains trauma to the extent to which it may not be narrativized, here trauma also is in the first place that very failing of language. And thus, if trauma is measured in part by its "non-symbolic" return (Caruth 5), then all of the reviews I've cited here—and, I suppose, this very thesis—are signs of a certain recovery, signs of substitutions of "interpretations for traumas" (Phelan, *Mourning* 17). In the end, then, I would call *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* a production in the order of a theatre of necessary misrecognitions, misrecognitions by which Bernhard's subversive substitutions may be subsumed in a realm of infinite play,²³ and in which her singing cannot even really be heard as such: in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!*, says one reviewer, "[a]necdotes, quasi-one-liners, variably straightforward song *readings* float in and out of focus, bound together only by the performer's ability to suggest infinite, knowing insincerity" (my emphasis) (Harvey). Perhaps though, and hopefully so, to the extent that these are misrecognitions, their recuperations remain contaminated by the very faultlines of the subversive failures they promise to overcome. After all, as Herndon aptly and emphatically misstates, "[*n*]arcissim [sic] is the word for it."

²³ Marks writes: "'I'm telling you, my life has changed!' [Bernhard] insists, standing up there in her fish-net stockings and black sequined minidress. Whatever! Praise the Lord, her act hasn't changed."

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Luxury Models

As Sandra Bernhard's eruptive stand-up practices evidence, marked references to an originary outrage and to violent reversals of power by the "wrong" or unauthorized subject do effect a certain agency, insofar as they may help produce a very useful subjective "presence" and authority. And so, the desire to unearth and to exploit here a real, true, and dangerous natural resource for transformative politics is not exactly misdirected, nor does this thesis seek any categorical relinquishing of either rage or intent. Rather, I hope to have emphasized the necessity of being able and willing to re-figure, when it seems no longer strategically useful, any "natural state of women's being" in phallogentric culture, even if—or perhaps, at the point at which—it affords the satisfactions of "visibility" in a hegemonic representational economy (Auslander, "Fem-rage" 125). For, as I have traced in an imagined narrative of Sandra Bernhard's shifting gestures and efficacies, the extent to which a naturalistic rage frees in this way is also a demonstration of how "the terms of this visibility often enervate the putative power of [the] identities" it is seen to certify (Phelan, *Unmarked* 7).

Bernhard's practice of a theatre of retribution is in this respect a supple re-working and "asymmetrical" repetition of the various fantasies of sovereignty, force and intent that seem to accrue to representations of rage and retribution (Derrida 19). Shifting rage from a material ground to a place—or to being a place—of fantasy and imagined violence, Bernhard's threatening displays are usefully implicative and enjoy a mobile range of

forcible effects. However, the extent to which this technique honours, if knowingly or even cynically, a certain alliance between representational content and its aims, is also the point where this gesture's strategic investment in that fantasy fails to enable. For in the promise of the implied eruptive origin also lies the avenues of its recuperations by a hegemonic economy which seeks always to incorporate and to defuse the threat of difference and disruption. In the scene of that fantasy, disruptive threat (or, on the part of the hopeful, transformative intent) tends to be circumscribed to the vexed body of the ambiguous subject, and is re-functioned as a hegemonic projection, which is what I take to be the mainstream value of and pleasure in the eruptive, confrontational other in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!*.

If, however, the performative's relation between language and the material is of the same plastic order as ideology, fantasy, power relations and effects, then surely rage may be reconfigured not only in terms of a theatre of retribution but also in postures which are not thus yoked to an implicit correlation between depiction and effect. As I have argued, Bernhard's shift to an apparently conciliatory performance mode in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* is just such a displacement, and is an instance of that nominally complicit reproduction of hegemonic figures that nevertheless effectively troubles the limit into which it subsides. If it is generally true that "a change in the order of discourse does not presuppose 'new ideas', a little invention and creativity, a different mentality, but transformations in a practice," then in this sense Bernhard's withholding of the figure of the eruptive, confrontational other simply resituates the terms of engagement of a threatening practice of resistance (Foucault, *Archeology* 209).

Bernhard's shifts—her apparent relinquishing of comic authority and subjectivity for, as Irigaray instructs, a deliberate assumption of the feminine; her substitution of a pre-emptory self-violating logic for that of retribution; her offer of a confessional real instead of the confrontational—amount to a "ruining by substitution" of those changes of order which work to recuperate her outrageous techniques according to a hegemonic representational economy (Schor 52). Bernhard as male-identified subject here works to be "addressed" as hegemonically feminine, but her embrace of "a more immediate and direct form of discourse" is a confession which is all too obviously not that idealized confession that frees but rather a "turn to the personal voice" that is subjection (Butler, *Excitable* 144). As importantly, while this confessional gesture is disagreeably substituted for a properly eruptive outrage, the freed raging body is similarly implicated as a like site of a "nearly compulsory production of exorbitant affect" (Butler, *Excitable* 144). In her musical performances, where Bernhard produces the "lingering actions" of a tableau of the receding subject (cited in Stewart, *On Longing* 48), she alludes to the failure of a collective investment in symbolic substitution, and implies that failure of identity is not "a special case inability or an individual deviancy from the norm [...] [i]nstead, failure is something endlessly repeated and relived moment by moment throughout our individual histories" (Rose 91). In this way, the seat of the Subject becomes the butt of the self-violating joke.

As I have argued of Bernhard's outrageous strategies, implicative failures in relation to linguistic categories are persistently read as a matter of the problematic body's putatively immutable, visible (personal) real. This effectively contains implications of the ideological nature of those relations, relations in which "a believable image is the product

of a negotiation with an unverifiable real" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 1). Bernhard's efforts to re-introduce ideology to this scene can be traced in certain shifts in her outrageous posture previous to *I'm Still Here... Damn It!*. In 1983, Bernhard is a "sexual terrorist"; by 1994, she is a "terrorist [stripper]" (Stone, "Pretty"; "Outwit"). These forays toward the hegemonic feminine (which culminate, arguably, with her appearance in *Playboy* in 1992) nominally work to destabilize the regulatory truths of that fantasy. As Bernhard as discontinuous subject insists, "I know I can pull off the looks and the look" (cited in Indiana, "Sandra" 31).²⁴ On the other hand, thanks to a postmodern, commodified moment of the body—or where, as Bernhard complains, "[n]ow people are trying to buy lips"—apparently (almost) anyone can (cited in Amos, 100). In other words, here the body's relation to a regulatory ideal is the responsibility of that visibly real but relatively mutable (and economically fit) body. Thus, I would argue, Bernhard's insistent *singing* of the hegemonic feminine effectively shifts the site of her assumption to another putatively immutable real, a movement which can be traced in the dissipation of the stubborn critical focus on Bernhard's body as the site of her performance and the present chorus of critical concern over her musical credibility. As Tori Amos insists, "[y]ou know, you can't fake a voice" (100).²⁵ Thus, by situating implicative failures in a bodily but also immaterial (psychic) field of the real, *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* effectively alludes to the resoundingly ideological and "immaterial construction of identities" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 5). If it is true that Bernhard thereby "has at least performed the public service of demonstrating the limits of just how far one can go on attitude alone," as a critic

²⁴ As ever, this is not quite a seamless display. As an editor qualifies by way of prefacing Bernhard's "Not Just Another Pretty Face," Bernhard is "a perfect subject—not, you'll note, object—for PLAYBOY" (72).

complains (Herndon), then, I would argue, that demonstration is a politically subversive display of the regulatory limit of the subjective real, and a measure of "the costs of women's perpetual aversion" there (Phelan, *Unmarked* 164).

To stage interpellation in this way, as a "staging of the drama of misrecognition," is to defer, if not to actually circumvent, the persistent desire for intentionality in resistance. A display of the infelicitous subject, as it were, alludes both to the non-sovereign air of its gestures and to the proliferative promise there, as a site in "a ritual chain of resignifications whose origin and end remain unfixed and unfixable" (Butler, *Excitable* 14). In other words, this is to dramatize and to exploit the very tendency of the performative and the subject to exceed intent; this failing subject enjoys "an agency, but not the subject's agency" (Butler, *Psychic* 9). In this sense, loss as well as rage may be a productive "space," and the desires of resistance may be re-fixed from something repressed that "demands to be heard" (Halberstam 195) to something foreclosed, to the place of "the odd term" in relations of power (Foucault, *History* 96). If desires for the intelligible mark of subversive intent are borne of a necessary interest, it is also true that "[w]e are forced, when we ask the question of woman, to question the extent to which we make ourselves the riddle" (B. Martin 14). I wonder then if, to some degree, those theoretical projects which seek scandalous and inherently transformative desires—desires in and of the carnivalesque, insistent, unruly, overwhelming body; desires in and of an absent and silent one—are unhelpfully displaced from a less bearable desire, a particular desire "to stay alive, to stay a little" which is not of the ego but of something else, a

²⁵ Bernhard replies: "[t]hat's for sure. And [yet] you have some people trying to fake a voice" (cited in Amos 100).

desire which is in and of the transient, disappearing and maddeningly reticent body (Scarry 33).

In Bernhard's theatre of interpellation, a joking subject is (comically, incompletely) precipitated, the butt of the joke is exposed (that subject, as a site of loss,) and the audience is contaminated, as it were, on the occasion of a "circuit in which no one's identity remains uncontaminated by exposure to the Other's desire" (Flieger 945). In *I'm Still Here...Damn It!* this proliferative effect is re-signalled, hilariously and obnoxiously, at the very moment Bernhard leaves the stage, at which point the audience is blanketed with paper streamers shot out of "cannons" on each side of the stage. There is here a persistence of the desire for "amplitude" after all (Blau 149), and of aggression too, insofar as Bernhard's apparently conciliatory attempt to adopt the feminine plays out something like "a handgun hidden in a handbag" (Barreca, *Last Laughs* 21). Gloria Kaufman argues that, "[w]here catharsis for an aggressor leads to trauma for a victim, feminism sees no benefit" (*In Stitches* x). It seems to me, though, that Bernhard's efficacy here in the absence of critical marks begs somewhat the question of the efficacy of testimony per se, or at least imagines a moment when testimony is simply not sufficiently implicative to touch upon its audience in any usefully imposing way. And in any event, this is not a catharsis model, for as Butler qualifies, a "'break' [of attachment in mourning] is never final or full" (Butler, *Psychic* 194).

It should be re-emphasized, I think, that Bernhard's displays of self-inflicted symbolic violence and her tableaux of the receding subject are not effected in *I'm Still Here... Damn It!* in the seamless absence of critical presence or intent. This subject, however diminished or degraded, must at least be implied in order for it to appear to fail;

its receding is made palpable particularly in its intermittence, which casts the regulatory limit of the real as a movable yet scandalously functional vanishing point. Thus, if this subject's particular ordeal is enacted in an economy where "one 'exists' not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being *recognizable*" (Butler, *Excitable* 5), then the failing subject who "[makes] visible her attempt to offer what she does not have" does in this sense have a little something (Phelan, *Unmarked* 147). In this respect, Phelan is perfectly plain in qualifying her thinking of useful economies of disappearance and loss. "For the moment," she writes, "active disappearance usually requires at least some recognition of what and who is not there to be effective. (In short, this has largely been a possibility for white middle- and upper-class women)" (*Unmarked* 19).

In other words, Bernhard's performances of whiteness not only work toward destabilizing racialized identificatory scenes but are also crucial to her own strategic allusions to a relinquishing of symbolic capital. Furthermore, while her offer of a confessional real is insistently posed in terms of subjective risk, that potential is emphatically not actualized in this performance. Rather, "the threat is in the anticipation, not in the act" (Halberstam 199). Something of that relinquishing "submitter" persists here, then, in the infelicitous subject who relinquishes intent in a scene where "power lies in the luxury of not needing to know in advance what the relationship is between representations of violence or sexuality and acted violence or sexuality" (Halberstam 192). This is a comedy of a particularly pointed nexus of enabling constraints, of agency in subjection and complicity, and perhaps, even more generally, "the linguistic requirements for entering sociality" (Butler, *Psychic* 29). In other words, the drama of

injured whiteness plays out as a kind of melodramatic extravagance, an indulgence in the delights of escapable danger.

I wonder then if the strategic use of figurations of injury in this model—not as marks of identity exactly, but of its failures—is a point at which such a model's efficacies are bound to be circumscribed. Although Bernhard's invocations of injury derive a proliferative force from situating that injury in speech or language, where "whose body it is [that is thus violated] can remain permanently unclear" (Butler, *Excitable* 152), in the same way that imagined retribution exploits the fantasy of an implied origin, so does a self-violating model exploit the fantasy of that "singular and injured identity" cited under the mark of political "claim" (Butler, *Psychic* 100). In other words, this model exploits a logic of the visible real even as it seeks to distress it, for although a display of symbolic injury is not a performance of altering the body, it still (crucially) unfolds as a live ordeal, in which the body is employed as the site of a functional subjective real. Thanks to this association, a display of symbolic injury usefully resonates with the status that physical ordeal (like rage) enjoys—if that can be said—as "something that cannot be doubted and something that cannot be confirmed," and this equivocation helps fuel its production of disruptive fantasy-effects (Scarry 14). However, as an eruptive fantasy eventually inhibits the proliferations of imagined retribution, injury's tendency to be taken as an assurance of "irreducible specificity" might similarly circumscribe implicative self-violations—at exactly that point where the sign of injury produces a figure of valiant disability (Butler, *Bodies* 29). This, I think, is a problem, and it's only right, in the deliberation of useful logics of self-implication, to implicate so.

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