

Review:

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Lesya Lockford (2004). *Performing Femininity: Rewriting Gender Identity*.
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Abstract: *Performing Femininity* is composed of a series of performances presented by the author to a varied audience, from customers at a strip club in New Orleans to a university class, in which a feminist history "Spin the Bottle" game was an integral part. Challenging the dominant discourse of feminist theorists, LOCKFORD looks for strength and liberatory possibilities in what appear to be forms of abjection. Traditional topics of embodiment are rediscovered in this provocative book.

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1. The Book Series, Organization of the Book, Origins and Themes

This book is part of a series edited by Caroyne ELLIS and Arthur P. BOCHNER entitled *Ethnographic Alternatives*, which is designed to publish novel forms of writing about personal experience that blur the boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities. The most recent of 17 volumes, this book by Lesya LOCKFORD has manifested the qualities that the editors have sought, in that it is literary, autobiographical, investigative, multivocal, critical and performative. The book is fascinating to read and eye-opening in many respects. I recommend it to others who are curious to know more about her personal explorations as captured in this book, to feminists of all persuasions and to would-be voyeurs and exhibitionists who are too shy to take off their clothes or watch others who do. [1]

There are six chapters, each of which takes on a topic of special interest to feminists, but in a manner that will certainly add controversy to what were formerly rather pat arguments about the range of acceptable opinions in feminist theory. Very little in this book has been said before, at least not from this particular perspective. Thus, it is exciting, challenging and fresh. As a textbook, I

predict that it will arouse a great deal of discussion in women's studies classes and perhaps lead to the development of some very different opinions in the halls of academe and the public marketplace, more generally. [2]

In expressing why this book was conceived, author Lesa LOCKFORD relates a conversation she had with her teacher, Ron PELIAS, to whom the book is dedicated, about women who "dance" in "gentlemen's clubs" or "strip joints." Dr. PELIAS contended that these women would not agree with the feminist conclusion that they are "objectified" (which is a negative term in feminist jargon) as strip teasers by the men who watch them, and, as a result, feel denigrated. LOCKFORD agreed with this proposition on the grounds that these women were not sufficiently aware of the conditions of their subordination. They had not had sufficient experience with "consciousness raising" to be aware of their abject condition as victims of the male gaze. However, LOCKFORD began to question her usual position, as she recognized the superiority she had given her own opinion (one shared by most feminists) over that of those who are actually engaged in the profession. She recalled that, just as feminists had long argued that men have articulated the nature of "reality" much to their own benefit and without the inclusion of women in their framings, contemporary feminists have also framed the nature of the dancers' realities without their input. "Sex workers were not being given a place at the feminist table" (p.x). The outcome of this conversation was that Ms. LOCKFORD undertook a very personalized ethnographic study of strippers. Along with explorations of five other themes relating femininity to feminism, she created this challenging book. Her central theme separates the question of objectification from that of the formation of an individual's sense of agency and subjectivity. "That is the issue that beats at the heart of this book" (p.x). [3]

2. In the Beginning: Birthing the Baby

Chapter one, *The Abject Body and Subversive Femininity* begins with the author's own birth, which was a dangerous event that produced her as a bruised and ugly baby, much to her mother's chagrin. This story allows her to introduce one of the book's key notions, that of "thinking twice." Her view is that at first glance, when first encountering a familiar, but unappealing, situation, (or baby), one should not simply accept the "gut" reaction that this is unappealing, undesirable or even evil, but to think again, and, if possible, to find some value within it. In this chapter she also introduces the nature of the rest of the book. Each subsequent chapter begins from a description of a performance in which she produces a "self" that is "abject." By "abject" she means that she has made herself into an unattractive or undesirable figure by violating proper behavior and social norms. Yet, she asks readers, as they engage in re-thinking her performances, to discover a subversive quality in her self-abjection, one that is transgressive and ultimately liberatory. [4]

LOCKFORD confronts feminist theory, comparing some of the stances taken to those of other dominant forces in the culture. These forces function "ideologically by pressing women toward conformity to performative gender norms" (p.5.).

Performativity is a recognized term from the repertoire of Judith BUTLER, well-known feminist philosopher, who makes the claim that gender is an intentional and repetitive style of performing. In accord with Simone de BEAUVOIR's ideas, one learns to become a woman; femininity is imposed upon women from without. Women learn to willingly conform to these stereotypes, and thus become internally oppressed, so the feminist argument goes. When women perform within the cultural stereotypes, they normalize them and, thus, accept their subjugation. A woman can become aware of her complicity with the dominant norms and thus resist, often by refusing to play the part of the feminine gender. These women adopt what in Lesbian terminology might be called the "dyke" performance, wearing men's clothing, cutting their hair short and avoiding women's cosmetics and perfumes altogether. [5]

Today many women refuse to follow the strict feminist lines of avoiding the feminine and a multiplicity of styles are coming into vogue. Confusion reigns, and the traditional feminist orthodoxy of refusing feminine identity is losing ground. LOCKFORD's own performances struggle between the cultural mandates of femininity and the quasi-feminist mandates to avoid being feminine. Other performance artists have also taken this path, using their bodies to express their visions of cultural transformation. [6]

3. Weight Watchers' and Weighty Questions

Chapter 2 *Stepping on the Black Box; Kinesthetic Experience and the Transformation of Body Size* centers on LOCKFORD's experiences of becoming an abject body as a member of a Weight Watcher's club. Weight Watcher's is a famous American institution (that has now spread worldwide), in which overweight people come together in a formal group to gain support in their fight against fat. One of the rituals of the club is to be weighed on a scale in proximity to the other members of the group. Stepping on the black box refers to the scale. During her graduate school days, LOCKFORD had gained about twelve kilos more than her normal weight, and she decided she should "do something about it," so she joined Weight Watchers. She had a sense of her normal body, and the one she was occupying did not feel quite "her." Belonging to this group was a source of embarrassment, as it is not the usual activity in which a graduate student engages. It is more often associated with middle aged housewives and unsuccessful fat people of all ages. It also suggests a certain over-concern with weight and body appearance as well as a renunciation of feminist values, which include the view that one should love one's body, no matter what shape, including one in all its excesses of overblown curves and fatty deposits. [7]

In this chapter LOCKFORD also describes the life styles of two women who are at the extremes of feminine make-overs. Cindy JACKSON has had at least twenty eight surgeries on her body and her face to create herself in the image of Barbie, the doll. JACKSON argues that through this process she has literally experienced the intimate relationship between appearance and success. Her entire career is to make herself over in the image of the most beautiful woman she can imagine. She resists descriptions of herself as self-destructing, foolish or

object in relation to her body. Rather she sees herself as a goddess figure, tempting and tormenting men. (I recently saw her on television, with her newest beauty manifestation, huge bright white teeth, which pump out a 1,000 watt smile that spreads across her face from cheek to cheek. Her teeth are outlined by plump, curvaceous bright red lips; when she smiles, the entire ensemble overwhelms the lower third of her face. To me, she looks somewhat like a yawning horse, but even more like Howdy Doody, a famous children's puppet with a "wooden" smile from American television more than fifty years ago. [8]

Even more startling is the performance artist, ORLAN, who has also been under the surgeon's knife multiple times. Her performance is her surgery. She arranges the event, complete with music, decorations, dance and poetry. Her efforts are recorded and photographs of her are shown in museums and galleries. (I recently saw a series of ORLAN in a photographic show in Breda, The Netherlands, as she had transformed herself part by part into bodily replications taken from famous portraits, for example, the chin of BOTTICELLI's Venus and the forehead of DA VINCI's Mona Lisa. She sells little vials of her flesh and blood, removed during her operations to pay for her work.) For ORLAN what is important is the public display of the surgery itself. For her what really matters is what the work does and which questions we would then have to ask ourselves. [9]

4. Learning to Dance at Big Daddy's

Would You Do It? Doing the Scholarly Striptease for Academic Gain is the most eye-catching chapter in the book, if you identify with the author as she becomes a full-fledged "dancer" in Big Daddy's, a New Orleans strip club. There, attending a professional meeting at which she is presenting a paper, LOCKFORD chances into an encounter with a stripper, which eventually leads to her own performance. She had merely intended to interview the stripper about her work, but the stripper challenges her to experience the sensations of being a stripper first hand. The justification for considering this action seems to hinge on a notion from Dwight CONQUERGOOD, a highly respected authority in the field of performance studies, that ethnography "privileges the body as the site of knowing" (1991, p.180). CONQUERGOOD identifies various ways of entering into a controversial space as an ethnographer; this leads LOCKFORD into a self-interrogation concerning her own motives and reluctances to join in the activity with which she is putatively so fascinated. One of her chief concerns is that her reputation as a respectable scholar might be ruined by stripping. Another of her concerns is that, given her feminist notions about strippers, she could not appreciate the feelings of power that her interviewee had described in appearing nude before a roomful of men on a stage. [10]

Much of the chapter is filled with the moment by moment experiences of going through the stages of playing the stripper's role throughout the evening. Her first task, for example, is to lie in the "swing," a lighted clear box suspended from the ceiling with an angled mirror at the back, wearing only a t-strap. The mirror projects the image of the woman's bare bottom out onto Bourbon Street, in order to attract customers. During the night she learns how to perform on the central

stage of the club. The highlight of her performance is when she dances on the small stage at the rear of the club before an audience of two men who basically ignore her. She tries to engage with them through her naked dance, and eventually, she says,

"I begin to sense a kind of power in making them be repelled by me. I want to make them feel uncomfortable ... I begin to enjoy the idea that they might find my body unattractive ... I look down on these men and almost hate them. ... They disgust me" (pp.79-80). [11]

For her, this is a change of attitude, one that gives her a sense of man-hating power. The last portion of the chapter concerns her reflections on her experiences and her interviews with strippers. To get beyond dominant feminist notions of man as pig and woman as victim, she must rethink her experiences. Lesson One: Desire is Desire is Desire. For her, honoring desire leads to blurring the binary of good vs. bad girls. Girls are girls and desire is desire. Lesson two, Without Desire, Social Acceptability is a Drag. For her, it is important to accept sexual desires and not let social norms dictate what one should and should not feel. Lesson Three: Desire is Fundamental to All Feminisms. LOCKFORD suggests that all feminist views honor women and their special forms of agency, without reining them in by threats of a loss of inclusion or respectability. Her own feelings of abjection were not because she was dancing as a stripper, but were because of her upbringing and past exposure to feminist thinking. Because of the strictures she was imposing upon herself, she was unable to enjoy her own sensuality, as the other strippers had. [12]

5. Lessons in the Classroom: Spin the Bottle and Strip

In Chapter four, *Reading the Body: Consuming the Feminist Scholar*, LOCKFORD describes her work in the academy as a performative actor. In this case, she develops a performance for a class session that is built around an adolescent party game called "Spin the Bottle." In this game, one person spins an empty bottle and, when it stops, a consequence must be paid by the person the bottle points to. LOCKFORD spins a bottle and asks the target person a question on feminist history. If the person gets it wrong, LOCKFORD removes a piece of her clothing. Finally, as the game ends, a man misses the last question related to the Declaration of Sentiments (an important feminist tract which echoes the Declaration of Independence). Removing her slinky nylon slip, she reveals her breasts and crotch, which are bound in surgical gauze. The gauze is blotched with red dye to look like blood. She walks, arms outstretched, toward the man and then around the circle. They all look at her in a strange, horrified manner; she claims that this moment gives her the power and pleasure of performing abjection. This theme is repeated throughout the book and is a keystone to her understanding of how what appears to be the most pitiful creature, the most oppressed and undesirable, becomes, through this status, a powerful presence. [13]

6. Lipstick Lovers and Shakespearean Songs

Lipstick is the theme of Chapter five. LOCKFORD loves it and loves to wear it. It is a symbol of femininity that is suspect among many feminists. At a professional convention, she presents a performance on the theme of lipstick—to wear or not to wear. It is a comic performance, with lines that are glosses on SHAKESPEARE. "Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale lick of tongue." (She licks her lips.) "And enterprises of great cremes and frosted must perforce be hidden in their boxes, And lose the name of Woman." For her the humor enhances the point of the presentation. She demonstrates the power of the transgressive and her own power as a performer. The chapter ends with an epilogue, "Bathing in Abjection and Coming Clean," which emphasizes the way in which her ventures into the transgressive have served noble purposes. She is at peace with herself despite any public dismay at her work. [14]

7. Thinking and Rethinking: What was she Thinking?

The final chapter involves reflections on her auto-ethnographic life. She recognizes that the reader of her book may be quite horrified and disgusted by her actions as she describes them. (I have had to do some thinking and rethinking about her performances myself.) She brings to her aid the general comments by highly respected ethnographers, Norman DENZIN and Carolyn ELLIS, who encourage readers to avoid ethical stances that allow others to be scorned and to bring openness to difficult situations in order to learn about another's world. LOCKFORD asks readers to mull over her motives, her experiences, one's own resistances to her performances and to find what new understandings might emerge from these reflections. She asks us to think again. She concludes with her own reflections derived from this work. Her work is performing abjection; the reader/viewer's response is abjectification. When she behaves as an abject body she rejects the audience's abjectification. Her body is transgressive. In this sense, it becomes a feminist act to violate norms of respectability that often hamper women's freedom of action. Her feelings are mixed in terms of the reception she has had from feminists. Often she feels that she lives in a bed of scorpions ready to strike. She has the scars from some of the bites. She is never totally comfortable. But she is also proud of her work, I think, and willing to continue. Her own form of feminism encourages performances of abjection; her own desires to perform and to seek knowledge embodied in her activities are crucial to her scholarship. [15]

The book is provocative. It unsettles; it balances theory and experiences in a skillful presentation. It is a creative enterprise, with a unique performance aspect. It represents a viewpoint that is rarely heard. I recommend it, with the reservation that one must think twice and still be willing to become ruffled in unexpected ways. Feminism will never be the same; perhaps that is what the "third wave" of feminism is all about. [16]

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