

Katherine Bode

**THE PREGNANT MAN: GENDER, IDENTITY AND
SEXUALITY IN THE POETRY OF
DOROTHY PORTER'S AKHENATEN**

Katherine, Kathy and Kath are taking a walk in the wild, sprawling orchard of Dorothy Porter's poetry. As usual, Katherine marches earnestly in front, scribbling furiously in her notebook. Kathy and Kath dawdle behind, picking wildflowers and gobbling fruit.

Katherine – Don't dawdle. We're in a hurry!

Kath – But we're having fun.

Katherine – This is an academic paper, we're not here to have fun. Now listen you lot, what does this Dorothy say about female sexual desire?

Katherine interrogates the landscape. Due to her intense concentration, she doesn't notice when Kathy starts doing cartwheels in the grass and Kath wanders off to pick some more fruit.

Kath (*from the branches of a nearby fruit tree*) – Look, it's Akhenaten (Porter 1992). We could start by exploring him.

Katherine (*exasperated*) – Haven't you been paying attention. We're supposed to be investigating FEMALE characters. Akhenaten's a MAN!

Judith (*rising from the grass*) – Irrelevant!

Sporting a plain white shirt, a tasteful tie and a well-trimmed beard, Judith also wears a studded, scary-looking motorcycle jacket, and has multiple facial and body piercings. A pink tutu, fish net stockings, and a fruit-and-flower-laden summer hat, which wobbles dangerously as she teeters on 12-inch stilettos, complete the look. Judith Bulter's gender certainly appears very troubled.

Katherine (*turning, surprised and startled*) – What? Who?

Judith – We must deconstruct, not confirm, the very notion of an identity of "woman," if we're to escape the phallogocentric binary oppositions that structure gender relations. Gender and sexuality are not essential attributes or identities; they're a set of repeated performances (Butler 1990). These

enforced cultural “acts”, executed by subjects who are always threatened by their own intrinsic fragmentation, achieve what stability and coherence they have in the context of the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 12).

Katherine – Judith, I appreciate your input, but we’re supposed to be talking about sexual desire, not gender.

Kath (*clambering down from a fruit tree*) – She is talking about sexual desire.

Kathy stops cartwheeling to listen. Kath sits on the grass, eating cherries and playfully spitting the pips at the women.

Judith – I’m talking about the way phallogocentric thought assumes sexual desire and gender are “naturally” associated. We must get beyond this sex/gender system to understand sexuality.

Katherine - Okay, I’m listening.

Judith – The norms of heterosexuality are constituted through repeated performances that “mime” themselves and therefore appear natural. In other words, “The heterosexualisation of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (17). Gender identities are thus both required by and dependent upon the production of “sexuality” as a stable and oppositional “heterosexuality”: “gender only exists in the service of heterosexism” (Butler 1993 123). Since the production of heterosexuality is dependent upon the repeated signifying practices of gender, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but rather, “as copy is to copy” (Butler 1990 22). “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (137).

Kathy – So, you’re saying, without the enactment of fantasies of heterosexualised desire, there’s no gender, and there’s no sex?

Judith – Right. Now, being produced and understood from within the “heterosexual matrix” (12), the multitude of possible sexual acts cannot themselves overturn dominant heterosexual discourses. They can however, disrupt and disturb them “through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation” (31). Herein lies the possibility of making “gender trouble” - of transcending binary restrictions from within the power dynamic of sexuality itself. Thus, it is the “butch” lesbian and the “drag queen,” as well as the “femme” lesbian and the “macho” gay, whose

performances radically problematise sex, gender and sexuality in their parodic repetition of the heterosexual "original" (137).

Judith reclines on the grass again, and Katherine, Kathy and Kath keep walking.

Kath – So, without the supposedly obligatory derivation of sex from gender, the chain that links male / female or masculine / feminine with its associated binaries, including: active / passive; subject / object; top / bottom; penetrator / penetrated; weapon / wound, is broken.

Kathy – Dorothy suggests Akhenaten makes "gender trouble" through the fluidity and diversity of his gender identity. In "Married Gods" (Porter 1993 64), Akhenaten, "this pregnant man," is both male and female, father and mother, sun and son; he plays the role of both the oppressive Pharaoh, and Moses, parting the Red Sea and leading his people to freedom.

Kath – In "Borders" (Porter 1993 129), Akhenaten claims that "in sex and art" he is "like a Hittite army," he doesn't "recognise borders"—the dichotomised boundaries of phallogocentric discourse. Instead, he "heap[s] male and female / into one silky dune / and dig[s] in [his] toes."

Kathy – In "Married Gods" and "Borders" therefore, Dorothy presents Akhenaten's polymorphous gender identity as a desire to make "gender trouble": to occupy all territories, to destroy all borders and boundaries, to transcend the strict dividing line of binary oppositions.

Katherine – Yet it was the Hittite army, the metaphor for Akhenaten's subversive gender identity, that led to his downfall ("The Party's Over" Porter 1993 159). Wouldn't this suggest that "gender trouble"—the dissolution of a stable identity, a self—ultimately leads to destruction and death?

Kath – There's always danger in challenging social norms, particularly norms as powerful and influential as gender and sexuality. Just look at the social and political sanctions confronting gay couples at the moment.

Kathy – Despite such dangers however, I think Akhenaten's polymorphous, shifting representations of himself evoke a flexible gender identity, and reveal a destabilised self, that is true freedom. Akhenaten resists conventional categories. He revels in the fluidity of gender and sexuality.

Kath – Akhenaten also resists the conception of sexual desire along the binary of active-male / passive-female. Neither Akhenaten nor Nefertiti are

sexually confined to the conventional, dichotomised roles of husband and wife, man and woman. Refusing the passive role, Nefertiti actively seeks her own sexual pleasure. When they're having sex, Nefertiti "rides" Akhenaten, "she growls like the desert / melts like sleep / and anoints [him] / exquisitely" ("Nefertiti Rides Me" Porter 1993 35).

Katherine – But if Nefertiti is active, Akhenaten must be passive. That's reversing, not subverting, phallogocentric binary oppositions.

Kathy – Why must it always be one or the other? We can have both at the same time. You see, Akhenaten is actually both active and passive. When Nefertiti is riding him, and Akhenaten assumes an apparently passive role, he is actually "her war horse." He rides with her, carrying her, joining her in her battle and her victory. Even when he is actively projecting his desires, wanting "to hold her / to lie still", his activity can be interpreted as a longing for passivity.

Kath – Dorothy's portrayal of the sexual interaction between Akhenaten and Nefertiti, which challenges the very distinction between activity and passivity, abandons any "natural" association of sex and gender.

Lynne (*who has been surveying the scene from the branches of a nearby tree*) – Without the constraints of phallogocentric discourse, sexual desire always challenges the "natural" association of sex and gender. Our conceptions of ourselves as male and female sexual beings are generally confined to cultural codes concerning the givenness of "sex/gender." Sexual desire however, when not forced to conform to the strict binary oppositions of phallogocentric discourse, contradicts a smooth "sex/gender" match. "When two bodies come together, where are active and passive, subject and object, dominant and submissive, masculine and feminine? Indeed, where are male and female, once the 'sex/gender' of object choice is understood as a small part of what makes us sexual creatures?" (... Segal).

Katherine shrugs her shoulders.

Lynne – The answer is—nowhere! Such attributes exist only in the rigid phallogocentric divisions that set up one "sex/gender," and thus, one "sex/uality" against the other. Without reducing its complexities to a simple and false binary opposition, "sex/gender" cannot explain, in any exhaustive way, the complexities of "sex/uality." "If it were not for the constant reigning in of the excess of straight sex/uality to 'sex/gender'—a roping of the complexities of straight 'sex/uality' to one of two positions, to one of two beings, to one of two pleasures—then sexual pleasure as 'heterosex/uality' could be truly rich and rewarding" (... Segal).

As Katherine pulls them along, Kathy and Kath reluctantly wave goodbye to Lynne.

Katherine – So, heterosexuality, liberated from the constraints of phallogentric discourse, can challenge and subvert binary oppositions.

Kathy – Yet Akhenaten's sexual practices are not even confined to a subversive "heterosexuality." Sexually aroused by an older man, his teacher ("Heliopolis," 15), sexually awed by the sun god "Aten" ("The 13th Day of the 8th Month of the 6th Year" 43; "Inundation" 45; "Goodbye to Akhet-Aten" 165), and sexually obsessed with his younger brother ("Just to Talk" 109; "Little Brother" 119), Akhenaten wholly escapes the confines of the "sex/gender" system.

Kath – Nefertiti also enjoys the "sauce" of another woman ("Sauce" 62).

Kathy – Abandoning the constant parody of normative heterosexuality, Akhenaten and Nefertiti also forsake the divisions between masculine and feminine, male and female.

Katherine – Okay, you've had your fun, but this is getting ridiculous. Men have penises and women have vaginas, there's no changing or escaping the facts of the natural body.

Elizabeth wanders up to the group. Composed of a pliant orange substance that continually shifts and changes, Elizabeth Grosz's body is distinctly volatile.

Elizabeth – Sorry for interrupting, it's just, when I hear someone say "natural body," I get a little agitated. You see, it's only through the phallogentric dichotomy of mind and body that the body is defined as "natural." Even if there is an essential body, we can never know it, or even whether it exists. Bodies are "the products, the effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself" (Grosz 1994 x).

Kathy – You mean bodies are inscribed by social pressures external to them, by phallogentric discourse?

Elizabeth – They are, but it's also deeper than that. All historical and cultural discourses constitute nature differently. Bodies are the products of these multiple conceptions of nature.

Kath – So you're saying there's no "real," material body on one hand, and its various cultural and historical representations on the other?

Elizabeth – Right! Historical and cultural inscriptions of phallogocentric discourse quite literally constitute bodies and help to produce them as such.

Katherine – But by constructing bodies as natural, phallogocentric discourse creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, which confines bodies within phallogocentrism, which constructs bodies as natural ... That means we're trapped. There's no escape from phallogocentric discourse. Change is impossible.

Elizabeth – Well actually Katherine, phallogocentric discourse constitutes, but cannot contain bodies. Like desire, bodies always extend, seep beyond the frameworks attempting to contain them. The body is not merely a passive object, inferior to and other than the mind. Bodies “function interactively and productively. They act and react, they generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable” (ix).

Kathy – Akhenaten's fluid and shifting body continually exceeds the confines of phallogocentric discourse. His “Ka” has “big breasts” and “fat thighs.” “She hides her cock / but can flash for ceremonial occasions” (“My Ka” Porter 1993 38). Physically both male and female, Akhenaten's “Ka”—his shifting, transforming, changing identity—“stakes” him out in the “noon fire” of the sun. He doesn't “fight her” fluidity or try to impose boundaries by acting or performing the right role. He surrenders.

Elizabeth undulates away. Katherine and Kathy walk along in contemplative silence. Kathy skips along after them, gathering flowers.

Katherine – You're both making out that Akhenaten is so fluid and non-oppositional, but you're wrong. Even Akhenaten propagates phallogocentric discourse.

Kathy (*indignantly*) – Where?

Katherine – The monotheistic vision of phallogocentric discourse is evident in Akhenaten's worship of the sun-god Aten. Affirming one body, one sex, one language, one truth—which is actually the body, sex, language and truth of the masculine—Akhenaten claims “the fish, the chick, the grit of sand / all swim together / ... / as motes / in Aten's rushing seed” (“The True World” Porter 1993 54).

Kathy – I think Aten is symbolic, not of phallogocentric discourse, but of Spinoza's monism.

Katherine – Spinoza's whatism?

Kath – Monism. Spinoza's philosophy rejects dualism and provides the basis for a non-oppositional understanding of difference. Where phallogocentric discourse assumes two irreducibly contrary and incompatible substances, self and other, Spinoza posits the notion of an absolute or infinite substance, singular in both kind and nature. The two terms of a dichotomy—such as man and woman, activity and passivity, mind and body—are therefore merely different aspects of one and the same substance, inseparable from each other.

Katherine – What's that got to do with Akhenaten?

Kath – "Aten is not a mirror," he has no mirror image, no other. "He bastes my eyes / with the true world / not reflection, not shadow." In Aten's single light, the two terms of binary oppositions are revealed as merely different aspects of the same substance, inseparable from each other. Like Spinoza's conception of desire (Grosz 1995 179; Wolfson 165-167), the image of "Aten's rushing seed" ("The True World" Porter 1993 54) is a force of production, an action that makes allegiances, forges interaction, creates connections of pleasure and pain, love and hate.

Katherine – Well I think the "rushing seed" is a male-centred image, ignoring, obscuring and rejecting the mother in the reproductive process.

Kath – Akhenaten is the mother. Inseminated by Aten's "rushing seed," Akhenaten "walk[s] behind / [his] glowing belly" as his "child swims in [him] / kicking at [his] bladder" ("Married Gods" 64). This child is created by both Akhenaten and Aten: "Your light, my light" ("The 13th Day of the 8th Month of the 6th Year" 43).

Katherine – No. The sexual relationship between Akhenaten and Aten represents what Luce terms the "homosexuality" of phallogocentrism (Irigaray 192-194), the system of exchange in which women are only intermediary objects, commodities or goods, for and between men. These circuits of exchange are governed and regulated in respect to the phallus. In such an exchange, women are essentially absent.

Kath – If the relationship between Akhenaten and Aten does represent the "homosexuality" of phallogocentrism, Dorothy criticises such an economy by making these systems of exchange explicit.

Kathy – I think you're both missing the point. You're trying to decide whether Akhenaten is the oppressive, phallogocentric Pharaoh, or the liberating, monistic Moses. Yet when we first encountered Akhenaten, we realised he was both ("Married Gods" Porter 1993 64). Not simply phallogocentric or monistic, male or female, masculine or feminine, active or passive, oppressor or oppressed, Akhenaten is continually in excess of such divisions, always and already changing, non-oppositional, fluid. This multiplicity rejects a simply either / or interpretation.

Katherine – But that's no good. We're writing an academic paper, we need a simple either / or conclusion.

Kath – Why don't we just say that in Dorothy's poetry men can be women can be men can be passive can be self can be active can be passive can be other can be men?

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* London: Routledge, 1993.
---. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* London: Routledge, 1990.
Grosz, Elizabeth. *Space, Time and Perversion.* London: Routledge, 1995.
---. *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism.* St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994.
Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One.* Ed. Catherine Porter. Trans. Carolyn Burke. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.
Porter, Dorothy. *Akhenaten.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992.
Segal, Lynne. *Streight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure.* London: Virago Press, 1994.
Wolfson, Harry Austryn. *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning.* London: Garvard University Press, 1962.

20