

# Radical Ambivalence: Engaging Poststructurally with Performance, (Re)Envisioning the Political

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## Abstract

This paper uses poststructural theories, in particular Judith Butler's work, to analyze the performances and interviews of Vancouver-based performers Heather Robertson and Nikki Prime-French and explores how feminist political intervention need not always be directly intentional and organized to be effective.

## Résumé

Cet article se sert de théories poststructurelles, en particulier le travail de Judith Butler, pour analyser les représentations et les entrevues des artistes de Vancouver Heather Robertson et Nikki Prime-French et explore comment l'intervention féministe n'a pas toujours besoin d'être directement intentionnelle et organisée pour être efficace.

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## Contextual Introduction

Has feminism undertheorized the range of acts that can be categorized as political activism? What exactly constitutes feminist political acts; that is, acts which contribute to changing material inequality? If this undertheorization exists, why has it occurred? I argue that indeed there is such an undertheorization and that poststructural theory can provide excellent tools to rectify this narrow defining of political activism.<sup>1</sup> Poststructuralism can contribute significantly to feminist theorizing of political practice, making it more nuanced and useful in late-modern society. Within current feminist thought and practice, the concept of direct intentionality as the basis for political action is a dominant and even exclusionary premise.

In this paper I examine the activities and verbalized intentions of Vancouver-based performance artists Nikki Prime-French and Heather Robertson both to demonstrate how this existing undertheorization occurs within feminism precisely because of its ongoing and exclusive prioritizing of direct intentionality as the basis for political action, and to question whether, how and why less confining conceptions may be advanced effectively as feminist strategies.<sup>2</sup> I also explore modernist conceptions of agency and political activism, both of which require direct intentionality. This will be contrasted with the aims of poststructurally conceived political activism. Judith Butler argues (1999, 11) that poststructural political aims are to (re)configure and (re)imagine constructions that have created and

maintained material inequality, so as to open up the possibility of destabilizing discourse and ultimately breaking down oppression. It will become clear how poststructuralism affects the theorization of activism, allowing ambivalently intentional acts to constitute political ones. I show that political activism can occur when there are ambivalent (as in simultaneously conflicting) intentions, as well as when the modernist criteria of direct intentionality is met.

In attempting to show that there are forms of political activism that do not adhere to the modernist need for direct intentionality, I examine how the performances and statements of Nikki Prime-French and Heather Robertson may serve as models for alternative ways of "doing" politics that have traditionally been undertheorized by feminist discourse. I specifically examine how Prime-French and Robertson do and/or do not (re)articulate current norms of gendered and sexualized being. These women engage with a number of subject positions, taking up many and rejecting parts of others, which, I argue, constitutes political action. I also discuss the self-articulated intentions behind the performances, showing that they are often contradictory and indirect. This indicates that there is a deep ambivalence both within their performances and intentions. As my title suggests, I argue that this ambivalence of presentation and intention is radically political, even though the combination of intentionality and ambivalence may seem paradoxical. While the performances are based on traditional constructions of femininity and sexuality, they also go beyond these constructions to open up the possibility of radically (re)imagining the world even while lacking direct intentionality.

Exploring the work of Prime-French and Robertson as political activism offers the possibility of avenues of political intervention that fall outside the definitional constraints of directly intentional, modernist

political agency. Feminism seems to be at an impasse, since postmodernist theories generally have successfully justified questioning the category "woman." Being critical of identity categories begs the questions: Whom then is feminism seeking to liberate? And how should this be done? Here poststructural theory is pivotal. Much political activism must continue as if the subject exists because we still live in a thoroughly modernist world in which such identity categories remain firmly intact. Feminists certainly need to think and act from this proposition of "as if" because, as Denise Riley puts it, "it is compatible to suggest that 'women' don't exist - while maintaining a politics of 'as if they existed' - since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did" (Riley 1988, 105). This article will show, however, that (re)defining political activism more broadly will open up new political inroads and help feminism through this impasse. The performances addressed below are invaluable specifically because they fail to fit within the constrictions for proper (intentional) feminist political intervention and highlight the subversive potential immanent within unintentional acts.

#### Prime-French and Robertson's Work: What's Going on Here?

I first saw Robertson and Prime-French perform at a concert in Edmonton, Alberta in November 2001, when they accompanied the Vancouver rock band Shocore on tour as dancers. I was excited by the potential of finding subversive gender play at work in a mainstream or popular concert venue, one to which large audiences would have access. Seeing Prime-French and Robertson's performances in these concerts presented, for me at least, the possibility of finding the political in often-unexpected places. These performances also have the possibility of raising questions for audience members who may not have otherwise considered such queries. As Philip Harper suggests, such popular

performances that question gender and sexual boundaries "characterize as politically acceptable a phenomena whose progressiveness must be questionable at first glance, because of...the distinctly cultural - not to say frivolous - mode of its intervention...,which renders it unorthodox as a political undertaking in any event" (1994, 91 emphasis in the original). Robertson and Prime-French's performances have the potential to engage viewers in critical thought. As Amy Mullin puts it, in concurrence with Butler's notions of performativity, such performances demand that viewers "shake off [their] stale ways of looking at things, or begin to look at issues and ideas [they] had not previously" ( Butler 1999, 174; Mullin 2000, 131). Most importantly, as both Butler and Mullin emphasize, the outcomes of such forms of political intervention are not predictable. They proliferate into an infinite number of perspectives depending on who is viewing the performance. If given only a cursory glance, Prime-French and Robertson's work, having the potential to invoke critical thought, fits with reasonable comprehensibility into the framework of what has come to be known as performance art.

In order to grasp the full significance of Robertson and Prime-French's activities, it is useful to establish an understanding of performance art that expands upon its usual definition as a term within visual art or theatrical practices. As Philip Auslander describes it, performance art constitutes work "in which artists from non-theatrical backgrounds have brought divergent sensibilities to bear on the act of performance" (1997, 1). Summarizing previous theorizing of performance art, he writes, "performance is characterized by fragmentation and discontinuity (rather than theatrical coherence) in narrative, in the use of the body and performance space, and in the performance/audience relationship" (54). While it is the case that an artist's stated intentions about the meaning of his/her work have been central to critical interpretations of modernist

and contemporary art, political or otherwise, the performances of Robertson and Prime-French often lack this self-articulated (political) intention, which may position them, in accordance with Auslander's view, among that range of art practice that "incorporates the functions of positioning the subject within dominant discourses and of offering strategies of counterhegemonic resistance...without claiming to transcend its terms" (61). This is the framework in which I propose to distinguish between politically intentional performance art and the more popular-culture performances of Prime-French and Robertson. I argue that Robertson and Prime-French's performances constitute political activism despite the fact that full intentionality is lacking. This lack of intentionality limits one's ability to think of these performances in the frames of traditional political art per se. While maintaining this distinction, I also want to acknowledge Prime-French and Robertson's roles as auteurs and their authorship/authority over their performances.<sup>3</sup>

Before discussing this question of the role of intentionality in relation to political art and political acts further, it might be helpful to provide a brief description of the Shocore show and of its All You Can Eat pre-cursor in order to provide a basis for understanding their value in the context of this article. During Shocore performances, Prime-French and Robertson come to the forefront of the stage near the beginning of the set and remain in front of the band, flanking the lead singer throughout much of the performance. The most salient part of their performances, as I first witnessed them, was their highly sexual behavior and stereotypically feminine appearances. Their costumes consisted of a range of feminine iconographic pieces, including, among other things, Playboy Bunny T-shirts, short plaid skirts and tutus. In this first moment, I was suspicious of the messages they were putting out about femininity and sexuality.

Eventually, however, like many other female viewers, I was won over by the fun abandon of Robertson and Prime-French's performance. Their performances seemed informed by a number of dance traditions, particularly by hip-hop and burlesque. Prime-French and Robertson are by no means superfluous to the Shocore show. There is interaction with the band members and near the end of the show Prime-French and Robertson have a mock dance contest with two of the male band members.

Throughout the concert, Robertson and Prime-French's dances are choreographed to complement the live rock music, but as the show continues, their performances become more parodic and playful. In addition to the mock dance contest, they start to interact with the audience as well. Near the end, they spit "beer," which is actually water in beer bottles, and shoot water guns all over themselves and the audience. At one point, Prime-French holds the water gun as her imaginary penis and "ejaculates." Ultimately, I was seduced by the playfulness of their high energy, highly sexual performances.

The All You Can Eat show, which preceded their Shocore performances, is slightly different. The core group of performers consists of four women and one man, although membership varies, except for Prime-French and Robertson who produce the show. Rather than being part of the concert circuit, this show is performed primarily in both gay and straight nightclubs and similar adult venues in the Vancouver area. The show focuses on the burlesque use of sex and humor to entertain adult audiences.

All You Can Eat consists of a number of separate, specific dance numbers set to a variety of pre-recorded songs, ranging from fast and slow selections, rock music, pop rock and hip hop. The parodic comedy of the numbers in All You Can Eat is more salient than in the Shocore performances, particularly in pieces where Robertson and Prime-French

mock popular female icons of the contemporary period, for example The Spice Girls.

#### Ambivalent Performances

Feminist thinking on political activism is still predominantly based on modernist, humanist discourses of rights and citizenship. Demands for equality are usually based on some form of identity politics. Identity politics occur when people identify as members of a marginalized group (First Nations, queer, immigrants, women, working class, etc.) and then organize intentionally with other members of this group with the goal of gaining the same rights, opportunity, and access to resources as those held by the dominant groups. Such modernist discourses establish the criteria through which a political subject is defined and acknowledged. Many theorists, including Butler (1999), have outlined the shortcomings of such modernist definitions of the subject, highlighting how these categories exclude many potential members of a group, are modernist myths and are even oppressive.<sup>4</sup>

Accepting this modernist view of a stable, coherent "subject" has specific implications for feminism's understanding of political agency. Within modernist thinking, it has often been assumed that for agency to be present and effective the will of the individual must somehow be held interior to the person as a coherent, stable "core" of being. It is believed that this core escapes the reaches of discursive power (Stern 2000, 110). The belief that an internal core, and its resultant agency, escapes discursive constitution offers hope because no matter how structurally determined a situation seems, there is always the chance that the individual actor can or will resist. The ability to rebel depends on having a core identity that escapes or is outside of discursive determination. Thus, agency is this ability to act because one's core being or identity has escaped discursive constitution. A central characteristic

of such a modernist agency is a direct intentionality on behalf of the subject. We make direct, intentional political interventions in order to change inequality in the material world. Only acts that are intentionally political, as in being intended to change the world and various groups' access to material and social resources, constitute political action. We push for change.

Poststructuralism, in contrast to modernist humanist discourse, argues for an understanding of the subject as being constructed in discourse. The subject is not coherent, fixed or interior, but rather fluid, sometimes contradictory and constituted through the constant (re)citation of discourses. In fact, the stable coherent "subject" is a modernist myth. By relying on a very different definition of "the subject," poststructuralism necessitates a very different approach to political agency than does modernism. Bronwyn Davies cogently sums up poststructural agency:

[Choices] are understood as more akin to "forced choices," since the subject's positioning within particular discourses makes the "chosen" line of action the only possible action, not because there are no other lines of action but because one has been subjectively constituted through one's placement within that discourse to want that line of action. By making clear the way in which a person is subjected by discourse, poststructuralist theory shows how agency is fundamentally illusory...[Thus] the subject as it is understood by poststructuralism...can only engage in apparent acts of choosing or positioning, or of experiencing the self as agentic. (2000, 60, 133 emphasis added)

Through recourse to humanist discourse, conversely, we (mis)take ourselves to be "choosing" and

"positioning." To accept the poststructural notion of agency does not, however, necessitate a slip into nihilist apolitical fatalism, as many, such as Lise Nelson (1999), have argued. To see oneself as an agentic subject is still a form of poststructural subjectivity and is still to speak powerfully, but theorists such as Davies and Butler seek to illustrate how this agentic self remains discursively produced, implicated and enmeshed in contemporary power relations that cannot be wholly transcended in the moment of performance. Prime-French and Robertson experience themselves as agentic in regards to their performances. For this specific reason, their shows, in displaying a somewhat deconstructed femininity, are contributing to, or at least offering models for, social change by offering new imaginations and material examples of being. Rethorizing agency results in this different politics and undermines the need for intentionality in all political acts. Politics can sometime be "done" without intent, as poststructuralism shifts the goal of political intervention to enacting material change through destabilizing discourse.

Given these different modernist and poststructuralist definitions of the subject, political action and agency, critiques of Butler's poststructural work have focused on its dissolution of the prediscursive subject (Nelson 1999). This dissolution is constructed as preempting any possibility of political intentionality and accountability. According to these critiques, Butler's work leaves feminism with no subject ("women") to liberate and no basis for directly intentional political organization around identity categories. Critiquing Butler, Nelson contends that political activism is by definition impossible if we rely on poststructural political interventions aimed at questioning, disrupting and ultimately breaking down identity categories. For Butler, however, these categories constitute a modernist fiction enforced by disciplined repetition. Exposing and breaking the categories down is the goal of poststructural politics.

Again, the focus is on the destabilizing act rather than intentionality.

Nelson argues that within Butler's version of poststructural politics, the "displacement of dominant discourse remains accidental and unintentional," such that new discursive possibilities (the poststructural political goal) are the result of chance convergences that seem completely autonomous of the "subject" (1999, 337). This critique of "accidental" politics came back to me while interviewing Robertson and Prime-French in August 2002 and later analyzing their work. It became evident that their performances and intentions, rather than being characterized as accidental political intervention, were fundamentally ambivalent and contradictory. This ambivalence and contradiction occur because Prime-French and Robertson are simultaneously reiterating and resisting various aspects of dominant discourse, which, in their case, means that they are both performing and misperforming "proper" hetero-femininity at one and the same time. This ambivalence and contradiction are "a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure" (Butler 1993, 241). In other words, it is an "imperfect" form of politics, but one that is productive nonetheless. Indeed, at its core, what Butler's work does is "theorize both the transgressivity and the normativity of performativity" (McKenzie 1998, 221; emphasis in the original). Butler's is a theory of both subversion and normative (re)iteration of cultural norms. In this sense, there is an inherent ambivalence in Butler's poststructural work, which is echoed by the ambivalence I found in the performances and verbalized intentions of Robertson and Prime-French. Beneath my reading of their performances as radical in relation to how their presentation of female sexuality diverged from and undermined dominant discourse, there was a more

important degree of conflict within their subversive stories.

One particular portion of *All You Can Eat* is an illustrative exemplar of the simultaneously normative and transgressive ambivalence evident in the performances of these artists. Prime-French does not appear in this portion, but Robertson performs with another woman and man to the song "Barbie Girl," by Aqua. Interestingly, the song is already a parodic comment on how women are seen as poseable, pleasure-giving dolls. Robertson and the other woman use doll-like costumes and robotic movements to signal their equivalence with the figurative Barbie. Much of the performance is a visual representation of the lyrics, which construct women as objectified non-humans (dolls) whose purpose is to provide male pleasure. At the same time, the performers' various (re)presentations of the lyrics are hyperbolic and parodic. With their bodies and facial expressions they signal the ridiculousness of these stereotypes. Regardless, the very fact that the female performers are attractive and are being posed and used for sexual pleasure reiterates the construction of women as such. Though there is nothing new about parody as a mode of social critique, one must also realize that reiterations of dominant discourses allow the performances to make sense and be powerful, particularly in this context of popular culture where normative gender roles are firmly entrenched, superficial appearances notwithstanding. There is recognition of the natural roles that women and men have always played, while the audience also realizes, or is encouraged to realize, that there is something interesting or subversive about their performances. These are performers being (hetero)sexualized women on stage (normative) but they are not quite doing it right (transgressive). Poststructuralism shows that it is through this nearly constant recollection and reiteration, no matter how varied, that normativity sustains itself, regardless of

definitional changes that are nevertheless occurring.

While the "Barbies" are stereotypical in their availability to the male performer, they are also aggressive in their own desire for sexual pleasure. While their aggression certainly destabilizes the notion of women as passive sexual objects, it may also be simply a re-idealization of what Joan Forbes refers to as "rehabilitated heterosexuality." She argues: "Female (hetero)sexual desire and the uninhibited expression of this desire can be understood as virtually required of women, in this way further eroticizing femininity. Compared to the 19th and early 20th century, women today are constructed as eager, desiring subjects and willing participants, who, in order to achieve self-expression, are turning themselves into erotic objects of sexual consumption for men" (1996, 180). This inarguably plays a part in the "Barbie Girl" performance. Butler posits that we are both constrained and enabled by dominant discourse and traditional constructions (1999). First, we must reference dominant discourses in order to make sense and be viewed as legitimate "subjects." In turn, dominant discourses constrain any resultant resistance. The Barbie is performed in order to critique the Barbie, but the Barbie (and all that entails) remains the referent. The ultimate poststructural political goal is to change the referent eventually. This goal privileges the act over the intention, allowing for political agency to be enacted without the presence of direct intentionality.

Lastly, during "Barbie Girl," Robertson and the other woman's sexual aggressions are not only directed towards their male handler but also towards each other. On one level, this undermines the "natural" heterosexual imperative through their destabilizing of the boundaries between hetero and homosexual desire, but on another, the homoerotic performances may be read as being for the pleasure both of the male (dancer) voyeur and members of the audience. Nonetheless, there

are still both normalizing and transgressive elements to these performances. Acknowledging and accounting for such contradictions are among the poststructural perspective's strengths.

When using Butler's work to engage with Prime-French and Robertson's performances, it is important to address many of the complications that result from the ambiguity of Butler's poststructuralist writing on performativity. Here Geraldine Harris's clarifications on Butler's applicability to performance art are particularly relevant. Quoting Butler, Harris points out that the type of performances I am discussing here are "bounded acts" that occur as one-time events, whereas performativity is a process, "a recitation of a norm or set of norms" (1999, 72). Performativity is defined by its very dissembling effect, which erases the origins of the norms in order to maintain authority and avoid instability (174). Harris clarifies that "a performative act only appears as theatrical in that it seems to arise from the authority or will of the author," and because the "process of citation on which it depends makes it impossible to trace the existence of an 'original' or 'real' historical referent" (73). Within Prime-French and Robertson's performances, discourses and signs of traditional femininity and (hetero)sexuality are reiterated. They perform ways of being a "proper" hetero-female, which are so common that we fail to identify their referents and over time have accepted them as natural and static. Robertson and Prime-French's performances are one time bounded acts, but they are also deconstructive performativity. At the same time as Robertson and Prime-French are (re)citing dominant discourses, they are also taking up authoritative positions as public performers and misperforming these hetero-feminine roles. These misperformances are deconstructive because they begin to highlight and question the original constructions of femininity and sexuality they are referencing.

This is only the starting point for deconstructing these discourses on a larger scale, but Robertson and Prime-French's misperformances "must be privileged in order to open up to contestation dominant notions of 'the' real on which authority depends" (75). Harris goes on to argue, "the subversion of authority or dominant norms is not simply a matter of 'author's intentions' but is rather one of a process of interpretation that opens up contestation (which, in order to be said to occur, must in some ways be taken up)" (76). This is why Prime-French and Robertson's performances are political even if not intentional. There is ambivalence because they are doing poststructural politics even if there are not directly articulated intentions. Ambivalence occurs on another level in Prime-French and Robertson's performances because they need to reference (reiterate and re-cite) the very norms of authoritative hetero-feminine positions they are also opening up to questioning and instability. In this sense, I am discussing performativity within performances, though the two can never be finitely distinguished, wherein dominant norms of femininity and sexuality are both referenced necessarily (to make sense and have meaning) and destabilized by Robertson and Prime-French's public misperformances on stage.

This process of reiteration of and resistance to norms through misperformance, which Butler proposes constitutes political intervention, has garnered many critiques. Specifically, Nelson has accused Butler of remaining "narrowly focused on subjectification, a privileging of the moment (even if it is repeated over and over) in which discourse encloses or subjugates a person's identity" (1999, 332). It is, however, at this very moment of constant (re)signification that Robertson and Prime-French's performances are successful in (re)working the discourses they use to articulate themselves. Their poststructural political success, regardless of intention, is the ability to illustrate the

phantasmatic nature of oppositional, hierarchical gender and sexual constructions, by exposing the unrealistic, hidden referents behind them. Nelson, like many theorists, assumes that "[subjects] continually perform identities that are prescribed by hegemonic discourse" (336). In some sense, she is correct, but Prime-French and Robertson's (re)iterative performances are not limited to this false sense of absolute determinism. Their performances are deliberate misperformances. As such, they are celebrations of the constantly available moment of rupture beyond the static (re)citation of normative gender and sexuality discourses. The radical potential of Robertson and Prime-French's performances emerges from their varied usage of conventional discourses, whether directly or ambivalently intentional. But their usage of conventional discourses can never be purely radical or novel because this would render the performances incomprehensible. There is a necessarily concurrent radical and ambivalent (re)iteration of conventional citations of meaning. From a poststructuralist perspective, Chris Weedon writes:

The range of ways of being a woman open to us at a particular time is extremely wide but we know or feel we ought to know what is expected of us in particular situations in romantic encounters, when we are pandering to the boss, when we are dealing with children. We may embrace these ways of being, these subject positions whole-heartedly, we may reject them outright or we may offer resistance while complying to the letter with what is expected of us. Yet even when we resist a particular subject position and the mode of subjectivity which it brings with it we cannot escape the implications of femininity. (1987, 86-87)



As women, Prime-French and Robertson must thus reference "proper" femininity to be understood, but they can also destabilize these constructions.

#### Ambivalent Intention

I also found ambivalence in how Prime-French and Robertson conceptualized the intentions behind their performances. In the early part of my interview with Robertson, I asked her how she defined their performances. She defines them as performance art, clarifying: "dance troupe doesn't...a lot of people refer to it as that but it doesn't, I don't feel it taps into it enough. At least performance art, you know that it's a broader, broader things to it, so that's usually how we categorize it." I believed the "broader things" she spoke of were the political intentions that are usually associated with the term "performance art." This phrase signaled to me some sort of feminist statement or direct intentionality, although as will become evident here, this assumption was based in my own modernist feminist positioning. Since the performances are lacking direct intentionality in meaning, it can be argued that they do not constitute art per se. This is why I made a conscious distinction between art and political acts above. Within modernist thinking, these performances do not fit neatly under definitions of the political nor can they easily be discussed as art because they are lacking in intention.

I was looking for the consciously intentional feminist agent, but both Prime-French and Robertson presented a deep sense of ambivalence about their intentions. As I realized during Robertson's interview that our definitions of "performance art" differed drastically, I described my own sense of the term: "I've sort of thought it was like, 'Well, you know what, I want to put this sort of a message out and I'm going to use my body and my art and my ability...to do this.'" Robertson replied: "It can be...probably

subconsciously I'm putting out issues, you know...I just, I don't sit down and go 'What do I want to say to the world? What is my message?'" This ambivalent pull between apparent agentic choice (in the poststructural sense) in their performances and a complete lack of intention is the most common theme that appeared throughout the two interviews. The fundamental ambivalence is that Prime-French and Robertson are performing/misperforming actively but argue that there is no specific or direct intention behind their choices to do/in doing this.

The first point in the interview when Robertson's intentional ambivalence manifested itself was in her description of the mock Wet T-shirt Contest part of the All You Can Eat show. This segment of the show involves various female characters/stereotypes (as identified by names on their shirts) such as Drunk Whore and Sloppy Cunt. The characters all participate in the wet t-shirt contest in stereotypical ways - Drunk Whore passes out and gets wet, while Sloppy Cunt vamps it up - but in the end the androgynous little boy in the troupe ends up winning the contest.

About this number Robertson said, "I consider it making fun of sort of girl clichés...it's just really funny and I think it's, me personally, I consider it just making fun of so many different...clichés and people in the world." This manifestation of self-perceived agency demonstrates what Davies describes as: "the discursive constitution of a particular individual as having presence (rather than absence), as having access to a subject position in which they have the right to speak and be heard....Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognize that constitution and to resist, subvert, and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted" (2000, 66-67). I argue that this is exactly what is occurring in Robertson and Prime-French's mocking of "girl clichés." They are taking on the

respected position of public performers, drawing attention to the constructions that constitute them as women and attempting to subvert them through parody and humor. Even if direct intention is not there, the political effect of destabilization is.

Shortly after Robertson's description of the parodic Wet T-shirt Contest, she explicitly denied the possibility of direct intention, thus contradicting my previous interpretation of her comments. Thinking that they used their sometimes comedic performances as a means of public critique, I had asked, "Is comedy sort of a safe way to do that...like a safe vehicle of critique?" Robertson retorted:

I don't know, I think it's just to switch it up 'cause we like doing so many. I think it's just more interesting if the energy level goes up and down and stuff and if we do more serious numbers where, whatever we're doing, I think it's just more interesting, that's why we go that route. And the mocking it, I just think, [maybe] some people might not even see it come across that way.

Still persistently searching for the feminist agent, I tried to clarify: "So, is your intention to entertain? Or is it maybe to be critical or it is to make money?" After joking around about making very little money, Robertson answered, "It's not, it's not to be critical, I don't think, well personally, I'm not trying to make some big statement...it's basically to entertain and then if you want to make a statement here and there you can."

There are a number of shifts throughout the interviews between a sense of intention and a sense of doing the performances for the pure joy of the experience. Particularly interesting is Robertson's privileging of the performance on its own terms above any statements that may come out of it, or to the

intentions potentially behind it. From a poststructuralist perspective these performances constitute political action and demonstrate why the definition of what can possibly count as feminist politics must be expanded. This occurs even though the performances lack consistent intention and, arguably, artistic status.

After my first interviews with Prime-French and Robertson, I had planned to go back and clarify what I constructed as their feminist intentions before learning that they had already been asked a similar question in a local Vancouver paper. With tongue-in-cheek, Elizabeth Nolan writes about All You Can Eat, "They've also been accused of 'promoting feminism.' They say this isn't part of their agenda, but they're happy if it gets promoted" (2001, 11). This is completely in line with Prime-French and Robertson's generally ambivalent intentionality. We must not discount the subversive potential of these ambivalently intentional performances, even though this ambiguity may be unsettling to modernist feminist theorizing of what constitutes political activism.

#### Conclusion: (Re)Envisioning Political Agency and Activism

Poststructural theorists' conceptions of agency are central to my engagement with ambivalently intentional political activism and to my argument that we need to expand the definition of what can constitute successful feminist political intervention. In this regard, Edwina Barvosa-Carter (2001) has struggled productively with some of the inadequacies of Butler's writing, in particular with Butler's failure to provide a comprehensive account of how she conceptualizes agency. Barvosa-Carter argues that agency's source can be found in a detailed examination of the web of enabling constraints that Butler proposes exist in the world (2001, 127). Given that we are always constituted by a multiplicity of shifting social positions, we always

negotiate with a number of different, often contradictory, discourses (127). We rely on these discourses to construct various identities, such as woman, Canadian, lesbian, etc. For Barvosa-Carter, agency is born out of this multiplicity:

As the subject picks up one set of tools (i.e., inhabits one of several identities) and leaves other sets of tools aside in a given context, the taking up of one set of tools vis-à-vis another gives the self a reflexive space, a critical distance, and a competing perspective (via the socially constituted set of meanings, values, and practices that comprise those tools) with which it can see anew, critique, and potentially vary its own identity performances. The reflexive space needed to vary performative actions as an agent is thus provided by the subject's multiplicity of subject positions. (127, emphasis added)

Certainly, Barvosa-Carter's analysis is useful. As Davies (2000) has illustrated, however, this critical space is only enabled by - and still constrained by - the range of available discourses. Further, the resultant agency that Barvosa-Carter theorizes is only an apparent choosing of action because we only have a limited range of choices. How we make those choices is also constituted and constrained, but never determined, by various discourses. Contradiction and dissonance within their performances generates a critical space for both Robertson and Prime-French and the spectator. Prime-French and Robertson are not apparently positioned in multiple minority positions (they are young, attractive, apparently white and middle class, Canadian-born women). However, in their failure, as (mis)performing women, to publicly conform to idealized hetero-femininity, there is room for critical appraisal.

Agency occurs because Robertson and Prime-French are taking up the position of public performers. Barvosa-Carter is not arguing that this is a conscious, intentional taking up of subject positions, but rather I see this as an experience similar to Dorothy Smith's argument that "[at] the line of fault along which women's experience breaks away from the discourses mediated by texts that are integral to the relations of ruling in contemporary society, a critical standpoint emerges" (1990, 11). Robertson and Prime-French's personal experiences as performers may not fit the ideal story of political activism but these experiences still exist. It is in these sites of dissonance (for Barvosa-Carter) and disjuncture (for Smith) that moments of reflection and action can occur. Experiencing conflicting and differing subject positions concurrently has the potential to result in new positions, informed by, but slightly outside of the old ones. This potential applies to misperformances of both hetero-femininity and political activism in this case.

In Barvosa-Carter's construction of agency we see our potential to negotiate within and between discourses, to explore how they constitute us, and use contradictory discourses to counteract others and go beyond them all (2000, 60). This is an invaluable contribution to the theorizing of poststructuralist politics, which has often been accused of being disabling to active politics. It is not politics per se that is disabled.

From our conversations, it certainly does not seem that Robertson and Prime-French were aware of the roots of their agency, as conceived by Barvosa-Carter. In choosing to assume the authoritative position of public performers and originators of these performances, Prime-French and Robertson have the opportunity to reframe their own and other's thoughts about dominant constructions of sexuality and femininity. They offer a position from which to reflect critically with a new set of tools. This constitutes poststructural

political behavior. Robertson and Prime-French's motivation seemed more about staying active, creatively productive and mentally healthy. For them, the boundary-shattering critiques that came out of their work were secondary to its value as creative experience. The notion that they are in a sense just doing their thing is exciting precisely because the political is being negotiated and constituted without direct intentionality. Prime-French and Robertson may not have intended to, but they are nevertheless doing poststructural politics. This is not merely a theoretical imposition as poststructural theory specifically argues that politics are not consciously taken up or done. Like Barvosa-Carter, I regard the poststructural "account of political practice as a radical vision that illustrates how everyday individual acts of signification can indeed make inroads to change and do so under the very regime that would perpetuate a status quo heterosexist gender order" (2001, 129).

No political act can ever be stably defined. Robertson and Prime-French's performances are neither purely subversive nor normative, and are definitely not a solution to all the problems that have plagued feminism's primary reliance on exclusionary identity politics. Rather than either lamenting the messy, complex, contradictory nature of poststructural politics, or celebrating its efforts to the exclusion of all other political endeavors, feminist theory must begin to engage with ambivalent intentionality as it has been shown to occur and be critically productive. New political subjectivities are emerging and, in order to continue making political inroads, we must have the flexibility to account for diversity in activism through the critical celebration of women's experiences and projects that seek to reconceptualize and expand the political.

#### Endnotes

1. Poststructuralism and postmodernism are often

conflated. I consider poststructuralism to be a sub-field within postmodernist theories generally. I am using poststructural theory in this paper because of my overall emphasis on language and subjectivity issues as sites central to changing material inequalities in the world.

2. Here, I would like to mention that instead of the conventional use of pseudonyms for research participants Prime-French and Robertson's actual full names have been used in this article. I do this as an acknowledgement of both their active participation in this research, which was integral to my method, and their artistic creativity and authorship.

3. It is important to note here that Robertson and Prime-French self-identify as performance artists, a point which will address again below.

4. See Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999) for a more complete critique of the modernist subject in relation to feminism specifically.

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