

## ‘Hey, you stylized woman there!’: An uncomfortable reflexive account of performative practices in the field

Article (Accepted Version)

Dosekun, Simidele (2015) ‘Hey, you stylized woman there!’: An uncomfortable reflexive account of performative practices in the field. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21 (5). pp. 436-444. ISSN 1077-8004

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/63373/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

## **“Hey, you stylized woman there”: An uncomfortable reflexive account of performative practices in the field**

*Simidele Dosekun*

### **Abstract**

This article presents an uncomfortable reflexive account of a feminist poststructuralist research project on young women in Lagos, Nigeria who dress in what I call “hyper-feminine style.” It reflects on the messy processes by which I framed the research and recruited participants, and considers how the women who did or did not eventually take part exercised agency to resist the terms of my address. The article illustrates the usefulness of Butler’s (1997a) theoretical notions of “excitable discourse” and “performative interpellation” for poststructuralist reflexive practice, concerning as they do the unpredictable political and ontological effects of what one says and does.

**Keywords:** reflexivity; performativity; interpellation; hyper-femininity

### **Doing poststructuralist reflexivity**

The practice of reflexivity, the researcher’s accounting for power and politics in her work, is now almost taken for granted in feminist and other qualitative research, something of a methodological box to be ticked. “Reflexivity is invoked in almost every qualitative research book or article and has been posited and accepted as a method qualitative researchers can and should use to both explore and expose the politics of representation” (Pillow, 2003, p. 176). Yet complex questions remain about how one is to actually “do reflexivity” or “be reflexive,” especially in line with poststructuralist theoretical principles (Britzman, 1995; Davies et al. 2004; Lather, 1993; Pillow, 2003; Youdell, 2006). Writing from a postmodernist perspective, Pillow (2003) problematizes the perhaps dominant notion in qualitative research that reflexivity entails the

researcher coming to recognize her putative self in her work so as to then reveal it to her reader. Likewise she critiques the complementary notion of reflexivity as putative recognition of the research subject. In such guises the practice of reflexivity returns to modernist assumptions about the knowing and knowable subject, and tends to yield “a catharsis of self-awareness for the researcher, which [ostensibly] provides a cure for the problem of doing representation” (Pillow, 2003, p. 181). Moreover such uses of reflexivity purport to “better” or more “valid” knowledge, rendering reflexivity “a tool of methodological power” (Pillow, 2003, p. 192; also Lather 1993).

Pillow (2003) instead advocates the doing of “uncomfortable reflexivity.” Uncomfortable reflexivity, as the name implies, is messy and unsettling. It bares the many ethical and other complexities of research without seeking neat or transcendent resolutions for either the researcher or reader (Pillow, 2003, p. 190). Its aim is not “better,” more “rigorous” or even more “honest” or “humble” scholarship. Rather its aim is to confound and interrupt; and this not for the mere sake of it but to resist disciplinary regimes of truth and try to continuously foreground the workings of power in one’s research and representations (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). Insofar as research is discursive practice, power is not only an inexorable condition but a constitutive one. A poststructuralist theoretical view of research as steeped in discursive power engenders an understanding of research itself as constitutive. Research constitutes its very objects and subjects performatively (Davies et al., 2004; Youdell, 2006). The performatively constitutive is that which engenders or does the thing that it says. Performativity is the “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names (Butler, 2011, p. xii). It is the discursive practice that functions “to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make” (Butler, 2011, p. 70). In the discursive practice of research it is in the naming, counting, quoting, representing and so on of objects and subjects that these very objects and subjects are performatively inaugurated or brought into being. That these things appear prior, as if having existed all along, indeed as if having incited the research, is a performative ontological effect.

It follows that the concern of poststructuralist reflexivity is “not *who* the researcher and researched are but *how* they are produced in these terms” (Youdell, 2006, p. 63, original emphases). Poststructuralist reflexivity entails the researcher tracing and troubling the performative processes and effects of her research practice, including her subjective implicatedness and constitution in them. “In this model, researchers [try] to see what is achieved through particular discursive acts as well as the constitutive means by which the particular act was made possible and interpretable as this act in particular” (Davies et al., 2004, p. 361). I endeavour to do this discomfiting and also theoretically and methodologically complex work in this article, using Butler’s (1997a) notions of “excitable discourse” and “performative interpellation” to reflect on the time that I spent in Lagos and the methods that I used to recruit a set of stylized women there to “be” my research subjects. Discourse is excitable, as I elaborate in the discussion below, because its effects necessarily exceed its subjects, while performative interpellation is a constitutive, excitable naming of subjects that is always indeterminate. Concerning, then, the unpredictable political and ontological effects of what one says and does, these theoretical notions can serve to critically reflect upon what one’s words, actions as well as lapses as researcher in the field may have engendered.

Briefly, the research in question in this article started with my observation in the last few years that young, educated and class-privileged women in my hometown of Lagos, Nigeria were increasingly appearing in local media and in the flesh in what looked to me like “hyper-feminine style.” As I saw and later heuristically defined the style for my research purposes, it comprises the spectacular assemblage of elements of normatively feminine dress including cascading hair extensions, long and painted acrylic nails, heavy make-up, false eyelashes, towering heels and so on. My interest was in how such stylized women saw themselves. A long line of feminist scholars have conceptualized such hyper-feminine stylization as “masquerade” in the sense of artifice and dissimulation (e.g. McRobbie, 2009; Riviere, 1929). In such work the tendency has been to read and variously psychologize the figure of the masquerade from the mere surface of her appearance, to see her as either a hyper-disempowered or hyper-subversive feminine subject. Eschewing this

epistemology of the surface, I drew on Butler's (1999) feminist poststructuralist theory of gender as a performative style of the flesh to posit hyper-femininity as a particular style of doing gender. Therefore, with a theoretical understanding of hyper-feminine stylization as constitutive of gendered subjects, my central research question became: subjects of what kinds?

To try to answer, I wanted to hear from the stylized Lagos women in question, to hear the discursive subject positions that they would variously assert, reject and negotiate as they spoke about themselves, their appearance and its requisite technologies and practices. I chose the method of in-depth, semi-structured interviewing to generate discourse with a small set of research participants and, in 2013, conducted interviews with 19 women in Lagos. Lasting over one hour on average, the interviews covered the women's current styles and practices of dress; how they imagine they are seen by others and how they wish to be seen, if otherwise; their consumption of both local and transnational media; and issues other than style and appearance of importance to them as young Lagos women. In addition to defining my research sample in terms of dress style, I delimited it to women aged between 18 and 35 who were university students or graduates, using tertiary education as a broad index of relative class privilege in Nigeria. My research participants were to include undergraduates and postgraduates, media broadcasters and journalists, film actresses, bankers, entrepreneurs and professionals in other fields. I start my reflexive account in the next section of the article by discussing how I came to even see such women and their spectacular mode of self-stylization as constituting a potential feminist research project.

### **Seeing a research project and its subjects**

My research is deeply implicated with "seeing." If, as I have suggested, poststructuralist reflexivity is a matter of deconstructing the performativity of one's research practice, the work of doing so is "not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of *seeing what frames our seeing* –

spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge” (Lather, 1993, p. 675, emphasis added). To the inevitably limited extent that I can reflect upon myself seeing the kinds of stylized women in my research as subjects to be meaningfully studied, I would say that I was incited by a collision of feminist *and sexist* discourses. On the one hand, my very noticing of “Lagos women in hyper-feminine style” as a potential research category was informed by longstanding academic and popular feminist positions that are at best ambivalent about women’s investment in fashion and beauty (e.g. Bartky, 1988; McRobbie, 2009; Patrick, 2005; Riviere, 1929). It was from my constitutive taking up of such positions that I considered that there was at least something to be said, perhaps something to be problematised, about what appeared to be women’s *hyper*-investment in normative styles of femininity. My seeing was further enabled and framed by my subjective disidentification with the style and even relative dislike of its particular aesthetics. Belonging to the women’s socio-economic demographic myself, I was also made to see that a new style was emergent among my peers by being seen to not embody it, such as in the somewhat concerned remarks by two older women in Lagos some years ago that I “don’t dress up” and indeed appeared to “need a makeover.”

Yet in my view, clearer as I look back – including the foregoing recollection of how *I* was visually appraised – the mere fact that my research concerned women’s embodied appearances meant that feminist and analytic incitements to see readily combined with mundane sexist ones. Much as I would want to reject it, I realise that the cultural space of visibility which enabled my research and rendered it intelligible and practicable is constituted in large part by the sexist objectification of women, that is the deeply normalized cultural notion that how women look is other people’s concern and can or even should be duly surveilled and discussed. By being partly constituted within this hegemonic discursive frame, my research necessarily re-cites it, even if with indeterminable effects (Butler, 1997a). For instance, it became evident to me during my time in the field how readily my research could be joined to the “citational chain” (Butler, 1997a) of sexist discourses that equate women’s desires for beauty and fashion with their moral and intellectual

deficiency. I found that this was how my project was understood by many others. To summarize comments that friends and family members made to me on hearing about my project, it was essentially about “Lagos babes,” “superficial women,” “runs girls” – local slang for young women said to rely on “sugar daddies” to fund immodest lifestyles. Hence the related assumption was often that my necessary intent as researcher was to mock, judge and dismiss the (necessarily) hapless women who would participate.

Butler (1997a) argues that the subject simply cannot intend or dictate the discourses or cultural meanings with which her particular speech and acts will collide and collude. The subject may cite and be cited with discourses that she does not desire, intend, realise or even know of. This is because no subject is the sovereign author of her discursive practice. Discourse precedes and exceeds its subjects. “The one who speaks [for instance] is not the originator of such speech... Moreover, the language the subject speaks is conventional and, to that degree, citational” (1997a, p. 39). The conventionality, recognisability and thus citationality of discourse are precisely what render it performative. If the subject’s particular words and acts “work” to constitute or engender effects it is because of the accrued force of their citationality and historicity, not because of what the subject may agentially intend nor because she pronounces from a particular position of authority. Butler (1997a) deems discourse “excitable” for these reasons. Discourse is excitable because it is “always in some way out of our control” (1997a, p. 15); “at once the deliberate and undeliberate effect” (1997a, p. 39) of the subject who deploys it. Excitable words and practices run their own varied courses. They resonate and reverberate unpredictably. They are liable to unexpected reinscription or resignification. Thus, again, excitable discourse always goes beyond the aims of the subject who, in any given scene, first speaks or acts.

Figuring this subject as the researcher and the scene as that of her research field means, among other things, that “good” research practice and ethics do not follow from “good” researcher intentions. Butler (1997a) proposes that ethical conduct instead entails being responsible with our use and negotiation of discourse *knowing its historicity and excitability*. “The

citationality of discourse can work to enhance and intensify our sense of responsibility for it... The responsibility of the speaker [say] does not consist of remaking language ex nihilo, but rather of negotiating the legacies of its usage that constrain and enable that speaker's speech" (Butler, 1997a, p. 27). While in the field I tried to negotiate what I deemed unintended and undesirable meanings surrounding my research as I encountered or became aware of them. Responding to friends and family, I tried to refute sexist and dismissive suggestions that there was simply something wrong with the kinds of women whom I was seeking to research. I sought to emphasise that my research aim was to apprehend something about cultural and discursive constructions of femininity, not judge my participants nor demand that they justify their dress choices. Yet I also see that I did not always sufficiently counter the potentially injurious terms that others were using to characterize my research and its subjects. I am especially discomfited by the fact that, explaining my project to some friends, I jokingly restated that someone had summed up its concern as "Lagos babes."

My belated discomfort for having spoken in this way is not because I deem the name "babe" inherently injurious. Many of my interview participants were to use it to refer to themselves, for instance. Yet when it was first used to characterize my would-be research subjects, I understood that the tone and implications were derogatory. In reciting the name, especially typologically, I lent it further derogatory performative force. This was so notwithstanding my intent to be humorous. Indeed even presuming the "capacity to refer to [potentially injurious] terms as if one were merely [joking], not making use of them, can support the structure of disavowal that permits for their hurtful circulation" (Butler, 1997a, p. 38). My discomfort is heightened by my realization that I would never have used language like "Lagos babes" to frame my research to potential or actual participants. I understood that in presenting my project to the kinds of stylized women whom I wanted and frankly *needed* to self-identify as its subjects, I had to avoid language that could turn them away. I was also committed to being as responsible and self-reflexive as possible when constituting or positioning myself as "researcher." But the researcher is not only constituted in the



bounded or explicit acts of doing her research – in the time that an interview lasts, say. In retrospect it is obvious to me that even when presuming to speak about my research from other subject positions, such as the position of “joking friend,” I was also always co-constituting myself and being seen and heard as researcher. With a theoretical understanding of the subject as multiply constituted, I see that the same standards of care and responsibility with my words and actions applied across the different subject positions that I took up in Lagos in relation to my research and its stylized subjects.

### **Hailing research participants in the field**

While in the field and on later reflection, I was increasingly struck by the extent to which Butler’s (1997a) notion of performative interpellation can serve to theorize and so to deconstruct the practice of recruiting research participants. The notion that the researcher hails or calls out to potential participants and awaits their response also seems most apt, metaphorically and visually, to characterize what I was doing in Lagos. Very briefly, Althusser (1971) understands interpellation as the act in which what he calls “ideological state apparatuses” hail or name the subject such that the subject misrecognizes itself in the name being given and turns around in acceptance, ideology having done its distorting work. Butler (1997a) brackets questions of the truth or falsity of the interpellative name by re-theorizing the practice of interpellation as performative. “The mark [performative] interpellation makes is not descriptive, but inaugurative. It seeks to introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one; it accomplishes this introduction through a citation of existing convention” (1997a, p. 33-34). As earlier discussed, the citationality of discourse means that the subject who hails another need not be a figure of authority for its words and actions to have performative effects. Unlike in Althusser’s (1971) well-known example of the policeman imbued with state power to stop the passerby, the subject who presumes to performatively call another may be a mere researcher, variously called and constrained herself, seeking subjects to not

only accept the kind of naming she proffers but also turn to give an interview account of it – which, for my practical and time-bound purposes in Lagos , was my definition of “successful” interpellation.<sup>1</sup>

As to why the subject being hailed may take up the name on offer, Butler (1997a, 1997b) argues that being named, being recognized and therefore first recognizable are the very conditions of subjecthood. “To be addressed is not merely to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible. One comes to “exist” by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other” (1997a, p. 5). Interpellation exploits the subject’s desires to be and to persist as a subject (Butler, 1997b). Thus interpellation as a particular kind or style of subject exploits the subject’s desires for this kind of subjectification and stylization, and for intersubjective recognition as such (Davies et al., 2001; Nayak and Kehily, 2006). I have already suggested one practical implication in the field of this theoretical understanding, namely my care to address potential research participants with names and language that they would find more desirable and befitting than not. I went into the field with ideas and intentions about the “best” methods to communicate what would be my carefully chosen words to the kinds of women I was looking for. Less apparent to me was that these methods would have to be also desirable to the women, not only to better succeed at recruiting them but to minimize the possibility of injury. I briefly discuss the three recruitment methods that I used below and what I came to see as their ineluctable because excitable potential to wound.

*Method 1: Subjects seeing for themselves*

I used a written call for research participants first. I considered this recruitment method most ideal because I wanted women to see the call and “see for themselves” that they fit the style in question. I promptly faced the challenge of how to translate into clear yet compelling words the visuality of hyper-feminine style in terms of which the subject of my research was to be heuristically identified. I worked through various drafts that read like rather cringe worthy adverts for the style

– along the lines of “*Weaves, lashes, nails! Sound like you?*” As I have been discussing, a related challenge was how to make the entire research exercise not sound judgmental. While I knew that terms like “girly” and “diva” are popularly used in Lagos and elsewhere to describe the style that I was concerned with, they felt over-burdened with meaning for the purposes of a written research recruitment text. Even the “false” of “false lashes” felt loaded, “already overpopulated with other contexts” (Britzman, 1995, p. 235). So it was after some agonising over the wording, format and tone of the call for participants that I settled on a dry version that aimed to merely list the constituent elements of the dress style. I emailed this along with a detailed research information sheet (stating the formal terms of participation, withdrawal, consent and so on) to a large number of friends and contacts, asking them to forward on as they saw appropriate. I also directly emailed the call to a few acquaintances whom I saw as stylistically and otherwise demographically eligible to participate. Much later I tweeted a version of the call and asked friends to re-tweet. These written methods of hailing subjects for my research proved quite unsuccessful, however. They garnered a handful of emails from women requesting more information but in the end only two of the nineteen interviews.

*Method 2: Subjects seen by others*

Seeing that I needed a method of reaching potential participants more directly, I asked friends and family to connect me, with permission, with women whom they knew whose style matched my visual heuristic. I then contacted these women mostly by phone to introduce myself and my study, following up with more information and my formal research documentation as appropriate. Through this more direct and personalized method of hailing women, I was able to schedule many interviews, of which nine eventually took place. The women whom I contacted in this way included a number of acquaintances whose style I was generally familiar with, with whom I was put in touch by mutual friends. Others were local “celebrities,” women with various degrees of mediated public visibility whom I had seen in local media and therefore purposely sought to

include. To reach such women I called on personal contacts in the relevant local industries. Most often, however, the women to whom I was connected by third parties were both unknown to me and unseen by me, *seen by others* to dress in the style that I was seeking. Using others in this way to interpellate potential interviewees raised a number of methodological and ethical issues that are exemplified by one “failed” case.

This case involved a relatively new male friend of mine who said that he would connect me with an eligible friend of his. He did so by inviting this woman and me to a BlackBerry (BB) Messenger “conference,” meaning all three of us were in one digital chat. I thought it odd that my friend seemed to want or think that he had to facilitate the discussion. He started by writing a line to the woman introducing me as another friend doing research in which she might be interested. She said hello, I then wrote: “Hi my name is Simi. I am doing research on how young women in Lagos dress. Please can you send me your BB pin or phone number so I can give you more information.”<sup>ii</sup> *Immediately, without a single word, the woman signed out of the chat.* She fled from the scene of interpellation, as it were, before I had barely begun my address. My male friend promptly phoned to scold me: my pitch was bad; I *had to understand* that a woman who dressed like his friend would not feel comfortable with it. Resistant to such performative naming as “bad researcher,” I protested that the few lines I had written in the chat had not been my pitch but an attempt to establish an initial line of communication with the woman that bypassed him; that his presence had made me feel uncomfortable, and probably her too. I also thought but did not add that, arguably, my introductory lines had been rather neutral: I had not specified what style of dress I was looking at; I had not told the woman I meant *her* dress; I had not got so far as to mention that my research method would entail seeing her in person. To such a broad and socially (if awkwardly) mediated introduction, at worst I would have expected an expression of disinterest or unavailability; a minimal nod to my hailing as the woman nonetheless refused to answer or take up its terms.

Perplexed by this woman's abrupt termination of our online exchange, I cannot but wonder what it was in the manner in which she felt she was being envisioned and interpellated that felt too risky or perhaps already too injurious. Was her discomfort with the proposed line of discussion due to the fact that our mutual male friend was digitally hovering over us, subjecting us both to his gendered gaze? Was it to do with the nature of their relationship and/or things he or others might have said about her style of dress previously? What did he mean when he accused me of being naïve in my approach to a woman who dressed like her? *How exactly did this woman dress?* What was this presumed to signify? If so fraught with sensitive meaning, was her style in fact the kind that I was researching or something else? Had I grossly failed to communicate my project, its intent and stylized subjects to my friend and, if so, to how many others? While I can only speculate, I am drawn back to my earlier concerns about how my research wittingly and unwittingly participated in the objectification of women and in the association of their styles and practices of dress with their supposed character and respectability. My speculative analysis of this and other failed attempts to interpellate women to whom I was connected by third parties, in which I sensed a certain apprehension or nervousness as I introduced my project, is that women who tend to dress in the style that I was researching may feel the need to be defensive about it. They may feel and/or experience that they are being derided and judged, including by the fact of their friends having suggested them as eligible to participate in my research. In this case merely being seen and named and discussed as its *potential* subject could be or feel injurious.

As I later reflected on my fieldwork, I came to regret having asked friends and others to help connect me with the kinds of stylized women I wanted to interview, even by asking them to forward my initial email call for participants. I see that these methods were essentially asking other people to performatively look at, objectify and classify women on my behalf, for my feminist analytic purposes which they may not have shared, purposes which were anyway complicit with a patriarchal scopic logic, as I have argued. In retrospect I feel that I should have only used my third method of recruiting participants, not that it was problem or power-free.

*Method 3: Subjects seen by me*

My third method of hailing research participants entailed me going out to look for and approach women who looked eligible, to tell them about my research and invite their participation. I had decided before I went into the field that this was my least preferred, last-ditch method. Not only did I not want to physically put women on the spot, I imagined that I would find it difficult and uncomfortable to approach strangers in this way. The latter was the case at first: I went on several outings in which I intended but failed to work up the courage to approach any women. Yet as my time in Lagos went by and I began to worry that my interviews were being scheduled too slowly, I felt pressured to begin to use this method. It was to prove successful, leading to many women expressing intent to participate, of whom I finally interviewed eight. It was also quite revealing of a number of my analytic concerns and methodological and ethical challenges.

The method began with me choosing a venue or event where I felt that I was likely to see women who matched the visual and other demographic criteria for participating in my research. These included upmarket shopping malls and boutiques, a monthly fashion and beauty fair and other similar lifestyle events, the University of Lagos campus, a large, “elite” church after the Sunday morning service and the parking lot of one of the city’s most exclusive primary schools after the morning drop-off. On a few of these outings I was accompanied by one of two women.<sup>iii</sup> My companions sometimes pointed out stylistically suitable women but, with one unplanned exception, did not approach or speak to any with me or concerning my research.<sup>iv</sup> At any given venue, I would mill around, walk up to a woman who looked like a potential participant, ask for a few minutes of her time, and then introduce myself and my study, pointing out particular elements of her style that had drawn my attention. I would also hand out my comprehensive research information sheet and, if preliminary interest was expressed, exchange contact information and so forth. As I became more confident with the method, I also started to approach women whom I

saw in the course of my daily activities when I had not gone out with the express aim of looking for participants.

The first few times I walked up to unknown women like this *I felt predatory!* I felt like a stalker as I watched them go by and then decided which ones to quite literally pursue *on the basis of their appearance*. Yet these uncomfortable feelings diminished as I began to feel more assured about the method and my introductory lines. The feelings were also mitigated by my perception, subjective certainly, that even those women who outrightly declined to participate did not seem harassed by having been asked, nor did they seem to find it inappropriate or offensive that a stranger had come up to them randomly to talk about how they looked. To the contrary, many seemed bemused by my topic and by their proposed association with it, and interested in the fact that it could legitimately comprise an academic study. Some seemed pleased to have been seen, smiling, for example, as I mentioned words like “fashion,” “style,” “feminine.” Most importantly, they posed questions to me too. On the very first day that I talked myself into approaching unknown stylized women in Lagos , as I offered my still-shaky lines to a pair of undergraduates who I had spotted in a busy shopping mall, they interrupted, curious about *my* appearance and identity: “Are you full Nigerian? Is that your real hair?”<sup>v</sup> Butler (1997a) argues that the fact of being interpellated does not negate the subject’s agency but rather inaugurates it. I reflect upon this theoretical point in the final section of the article in terms of its implications for my research participants’ self-representations in the interviews.

### **Research subjects representing themselves**

As a constitutive interpellation, naming subjects as particular kinds to render them as such, the act of recruiting research participants is never guaranteed to succeed. The interpellative call inaugurates the possibility that the subject to whom it is addressed may not turn in response, as in the earlier example of the woman with whom I attempted to start a conversation via BlackBerry

Messenger. Alternatively if the subject being interpellated responds it may be only to reject the name that she is being given or to know who presumes to call her as such. This last point is well-illustrated by the example just above, of the two women who I nervously approached who promptly turned my kind of gaze back on to me, wanting to understand who exactly was addressing them. That these women did not eventually participate in my study further illustrates the point I wish to underscore here: that *all the women* in Lagos whom I attempted to interpellate and recruit into my research via one or another method exercised agency with respect to my performative and excitable words and actions. The women could identify or disidentify as the kind of stylized feminine subject in question. Those who identified as this subject retained the capacity to ignore or reject my address, as many did, or to change their mind about participating along the way. Also agentic were the women who *did* ultimately take part in my research interviews.

Butler (1997a, 1997b, 1999) argues that the subject who actively takes up the name and terms by which it is interpellated is agentic in doing so and, moreover, continues to be agentic on this basis. This is because agency comprises the resignification, redirection and proliferation of discursive power, not its origination or destruction. As the subject's constitutive condition, power is also the condition of the subject's constituted capacity to choose, act, name and re-name itself and so on. While the subject may not choose the name by which it is first hailed, accepting this name or "founding subordination" engenders the agentic possibility of repeating it "never quite in the same terms... [or] for another purpose, one whose future is partially open" (1997a, p. 38; also 1999, 2000). My research interviews were very much the scene of the exercise of such discursive agency: the women who participated variously signified and qualified just how much or how little they were the stylized feminine subject of my research, and with just what meanings and effects. As I earlier indicated, this was the very purpose of the interviews, to learn something of how the women see themselves.

One of my central findings was that participants tended to dissociate from various presumed implications of their style, as well as from other women who dressed in similar fashion.



For instance one participant dismissed other similarly stylized women as “peacocks... strutting around trying to get attention.” Another said right at the start of her interview: “I remember when I was reading [the research information sheet] and it said nails, lashes and a few things and I was like ‘ok I don’t identify with that style.’” I had seen and hailed this woman at a fashion event and, weeks later, when I had long assumed that the prospect of an interview was passed, *she* had re-initiated contact. Hearing her proceed to disidentify with the style I was researching, I wondered, heart sinking, why she had come forward to be interviewed. Disidentifying with the stylized feminine figure of my research but nonetheless consenting to participate, would I have sound methodological and ethical grounds to include her interview in my final project? How was this question complicated by the fact that, to my admittedly subjective and invested eye, she *did* sufficiently match the style in question? I asked this woman to elaborate on her sense of disidentification and she explained that her style was “effortless,” as she felt style should be. Thus my understanding then and at later points in the interview was that she was dissociating from any possible connection between the feminine look that I had struggled to paint in words on my research recruitment documents and a sexist subject position like “high-maintenance woman,” as several other participants named it.

Methodologically, the fact that my research subjects variously qualified, disclaimed, dissociated and so on reflects the multiple subjective viewpoints from which they came to be seen and constituted as eligible to participate in my research in the first place. I hear it, too, as a moralized self-positioning that serves to distance the kinds of negative social judgements that may accompany women’s apparent “over-investment” in their appearance. Yet all this said I must admit that as I saw and hailed and interviewed more and more stylized women in Lagos , I was increasingly struck by how much more spectacular some appeared than others, so much so that my own view of what looked hyper-feminine began to shift. By the time I had completed all the interviews, I questioned whether it would be fair and consistent to continue to see all the participants as belonging to the same stylistic category. Having seen the women’s variety for myself

and having heard many actively relativize their dress practice, I imagined that if they could see each other, some would dislike or dispute my representation of them in my research with, alongside, as if looking like some of the others. Reflecting on what I deemed both a methodological and ethical risk of blatant misrepresentation, while still in the field I realized that what I was heuristically defining as hyper-feminine must be conceptualized as a spectrum versus singular degree of style, such that my research participants can be seen as located at different points along this spectrum.

I do not propose this additional theoretical view here to seek release from my “discomfort with the problematics of representation through a [putatively] transcendent clarity” (Pillow, 2003, p. 187). Rather it was part of what came to frame my seeing in the field and thus to lend greater conceptual and methodological coherence to what I saw myself doing. Notably it helped me to better ground my decision not to include in my final research project one of the 19 women whom I interviewed. In terms of how I saw this woman and how I heard her position herself as we spoke, I believe that it would constitute clear misrepresentation to suggest that she falls on a spectrum of hyper-feminine stylization, however wide and imprecise its bounds. Consider that this woman reported that she almost never wore hair extensions, false lashes, false nails, high heels or much make up beyond eyeliner. She signed up to participate in the research having been forwarded my email call for participants, such that the interview was scheduled before I had ever seen her. When I did meet her I was puzzled as to how she had seen herself in the style that I had tried to describe in the call, but lacked the forthrightness to ask. Clearly, as in this case, “[i]nterpellation is an address that regularly misses its mark” (Butler, 1997a, p. 33). Not sovereign or transparent to herself, the interpellated subject cannot fully know or “rationalize” why she answers any particular call. Among other things, the subject may simply misread the address to which she turns, or the miscommunication may stem from the address itself.

Cautioned by this instance of meaning misfired, I would yet maintain that we can see the 18 women in my final research as agentic in both the fact and manner of their being there. Having agentially responded to my interpellations and agentially represented themselves in the

interviews, the women are agentic in having become the subjects of my eventual representation. I understand agency in poststructuralist theoretical terms not as sovereign or masterful self-authoring but as a constituted effect; as the “taking up of the tools [of discourse] where they lie, where the very “taking up” is enabled by the tool lying there” (Butler, 1999, p. 185). The work of what I have proposed in this article as poststructuralist reflexivity is to try to see what tools are proffered and where they are employed by the practice of research itself. It is the work of “mapping the ground of the selves we gazed at” in our research (Davies et al., 2004, p. 385). Therefore, doing poststructuralist reflexivity becomes one of the researcher’s responsibilities towards her research subjects and in her representations of them, not least as it is premised on a fundamental recognition of their agency: that constituted, excitable capacity that means that research subjects always exceed the names by which the researcher may hail or represent them.

### **Conclusion**

The notion that discourse and discursive practice are imbued with power to “do things,” to engender effects, is the core of Butler’s (1997a, 1999, 2011) poststructuralist theory of performativity. Her work on the performative effects of speech, in particular, is centrally concerned with names (1997a). Names and thus the practice of naming are the necessary beginning and condition of research, that is naming research concerns, objects, subjects, fields and so on. This is so even when the very purpose of research is to enquire into the discursive and performative constitution of such things, as in my work on how Lagos women who dress in hyper-feminine fashion thereby constitute themselves – as I named the research to *do* it. Butler (1997a) develops the theoretical concepts of discourse as excitable and interpellation as performative to show that names and the practices by which subjects variously give, accept, rework or reject them have political and ontological effects, unpredictable and far-ranging ones at that. In this article I have proposed and sought to illustrate the applicability of these concepts to feminist poststructuralist

research and reflexive practice. My view is they provide new and useful conceptual and methodological tools for the researcher trying to see the performative lives and reverberations of what she might have said and done and intended, or not, in the field. Albeit always limited, this reflexive seeing is a necessary first step to try to trouble the performativity of one's research practice and thus the regimes of power/knowledge that constitute and are constituted by it.

This work of seeing is uncomfortable, too. Understanding discourse as excitable and the practice of recruiting research subjects as performative rather than merely descriptive or self-evident debunks any conception of the researcher as sovereign in her research or its field. It means that the researcher's words and practices always precede and exceed her. It means that, if successful, the researcher invites her research subjects to come into being in agentic and so indeterminate ways. At the same time, the constitutive "excess" of the researcher's words and methods does not absolve her of ethical and political responsibility for them. Quite the contrary it grounds and heightens her responsibility for what she says and does. "This paradox intimates an ethical dilemma brewing at the inception" of research, one that has no neat resolution (Butler, 1997a, p. 28). If many uses of reflexivity return however implicitly "to a simpler and more reassuring map of power, one in which the assumption of sovereignty remains secure" (Butler, 1997a, p. 78), for the feminist poststructuralist researcher grappling with Butler's theory of discursive performativity to reflect on her research practice, there is no such comfortable or cathartic place.

## References

Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and Philosophy* (pp. 127-188). London, England: New Left Books.

- Bartky, S. L. (1988). Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power. In I. Diamond and L. Quinby (Eds.), *Feminism & Foucault: reflections on resistance* (pp. 61-86). Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Britzman, D. (2000). The question of belief: Writing poststructural ethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(3), 229-238.
- Butler, J. (1997a). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997b). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2001). Giving an account of oneself. *Diacritics*, 31(4), 22-40.
- Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies that matter*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York, NY: Routledge
- Davies, B., Dormer, S., Gannon, S., Laws, C., Rocco, S., Taguchi, H. L. and McCann, H. (2001). Becoming schoolgirls: the ambivalent project of subjectification. *Gender and Education*, 13(2), 167-182.
- Davies, B., Browne, J., Gannon, S., Honan, E., Laws, C., Mueller-Rockstroh, B. and Petersen, E. B. (2004). The ambivalent practices of reflexivity. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(3), 360-389.

- Lather, P. (1993). Fertile obsessions: Validity after poststructuralism. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34(4), 673-693.
- McRobbie, A. 2009. *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. London, England: Sage.
- Nayak, A. and Kehily, M.J. (2006). Gender Undone: Subversion, Regulation and Embodiment in the Work of Judith Butler. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(4), 459-472.
- Patrick, A. (2005). Queening it: Women's taste for jewelry excesses in post-war Britain. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 15(2), 119-146.
- Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16(2), 175-196.
- Riviere, J. (1929). Womanliness as masquerade. *International Journal of Psychology* 10, 303-313.
- Youdell, D. (2006). *Impossible bodies, impossible selves: Exclusions and student subjectivities*, Dordrecht: Springer Verlag.

---

<sup>i</sup> I agree with Butler (1997a) that interpellation may succeed constitutively even if the subject being hailed does not turn or does not hear, agree or even know that she is being hailed. An experience in the field illustrates this theoretical point: I wanted to interview a certain acquaintance whose style I saw as emblematic of the hyper-feminine. A number of our mutual friends also suggested her to me as such. I contacted this woman by email and text message but she never replied. Much later a mutual friend reported that the woman had seen my messages and intended to forward

---

the call for participants on to potentially eligible friends, not thinking that it applied *to her*. This last point was a great surprise to me. Yet the fact that this woman did not see herself as the kind of stylized feminine subject I was seeking to interview did not mean that I or others stopped seeing her as such. It is possible that despite one's refusal to take up the particular name by which one is hailed, "the name continues to force itself upon [one], to delineate the space [one occupies], to construct a social positionality" (Butler, 1997a, 33).

<sup>ii</sup> BlackBerry Messenger users must exchange pin numbers in order to be able to chat directly.

<sup>iii</sup> I was accompanied by a friend to the University of Lagos and a nearby mall, and by a cousin to several fashion and lifestyle events where we both were also attending and participating as 'regular' customers.

<sup>iv</sup> At one fashion event with my cousin, we ran into two acquaintances of her's who fit the style I was researching, whom I therefore intended to approach in the course of the afternoon. Without my knowing or requesting, my cousin said something to these women about my research and then came to tell me that they were "ready" to hear from me. As I proceeded to introduce my project to the women, they expressed a borderline hostility that I did not otherwise experience from any prospective participants. As such the experience reiterated my sense that it was important for me to do the initial framing of my research to potential participants, to avoid its inadvertent, excitable misrepresentation as a negative exercise.

<sup>v</sup> I am very commonly asked such questions in Nigeria, referring respectively, I believe, to my skin tone and to the fact that I had long dreadlocks at the time, a fairly uncommon hairstyle in Lagos .