

# Queering Girard—De-Freuding Butler

## A Theoretical Encounter between Judith Butler's Gender Performativity and René Girard's Mimetic Theory

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**T**his article attempts to respond to the fractional presence of feminist discourse around René Girard's theory of mimetic desire. I will first briefly examine the relevant critical stands on mimesis and then proceed to rehabilitate it for feminism via an analysis of Judith Butler's theory of performative gender. By bringing together selected aspects of Girard and Butler's work, it will be possible to build a constructive dialogue between the two thinkers. Due to the scope of the paper I will not be able to give an exhaustive account of the respective theories, and hence I will discuss only the most relevant aspects. Girard is concerned with giving an account of conflictual mimetic desire in social and cultural formation. I will follow a slightly different direction and concentrate on nonacquisitive, peaceful mimesis in identity formation, particularly with regard to gender. What is more, I will treat gender as a particular case of mimesis starting from an assumption that we perform gender as we perform mimesis. This will act as a kind of intellectual experiment that will allow me to explore the

complexities of the relationship between gender and mimetic desire. The theories of Butler and Girard can be productively read together to explore new ways of thinking about gender. I will show that the “failure” in mimesis—that is, the constant approximation to the perfect imitation—guarantees unrestricted differentiation in gender, for which Butler argues. This combination of Girard and Butler aims to open up Girardian theory to exchanges with feminism and queer and transgender studies. In the second part of this article I will present a case study featuring Sigmund Freud’s masculine “little girl.” There I will demonstrate how a Girardian reading solves theoretical problems that both Freud and Butler encounter in interpreting this masculine “little girl.” I will argue that Girard’s theory of mimesis offers Butler new possibilities for thinking about gender and identification. My claim will be that the psychoanalytical framework that Butler draws upon is the cause of theoretical impasses that she encounters and that Girard’s theory allows for overcoming these deadlocks.

#### FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF GIRARD

The concept of mimetic desire developed by René Girard has not invited an eager feminist response thus far. This is evident if we consider the relative scarcity of the material published on the topic. Since Girard’s theory was conceived as one of universal validity applicable to all human beings, sexual difference has not been considered relevant to it.

Two feminist theoreticians, Toril Moi and Sarah Kofman, have responded to this insensitivity toward the questions of gender and sexual difference. Moi argues that Girard is mainly concerned with the male-male-female constellation, where men are always the subjects and mediators and the woman is the object of desire. She suggests that in his literary analyses Girard tends to ignore women writers, to misread novels with females as protagonists and misinterpret their desire.<sup>1</sup> Moi also detects problems in Girard’s critique of Freud, insisting that Girard’s refutation of the Oedipus complex relies on the devaluation of the mother and privileging of the father.<sup>2</sup> Girard ignores the preoedipal stage in the development of a child,<sup>3</sup> because “the weaknesses of [his] theory are clearly exposed”<sup>4</sup> if it is used to examine the preoedipal stage. Moi claims that “if Girard’s mimetic theory is applied to the preoedipal stage, one is obliged to posit the woman’s desire as original, [and then as a result] the mother’s desire becomes paradigmatic of all desire.”<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, would lead to the conclusion that all males should be homosexual. The only solution to this problem, according to Moi, would

be to claim that heterosexuality is an “inborn instinct,” but this in turn would contradict Girard’s central thesis that desire is never autonomous but stems from rivalry or imitation.<sup>6</sup> Moi’s main contention against Girard’s “proud, patriarchal and monolithic” theory, however, is that it cannot account for feminine desire, and therefore all claims to universal validity must be abandoned.<sup>7</sup>

Kofman’s argumentation against Girardian theory is also directed toward his critique of Freud, focusing on his treatment of narcissism. Girard views women’s self-sufficiency as an illusion, in which the woman, a coquette, pretends to desire herself to attract the desire of the man. This, according to Kofman, would deny the possibility of woman’s genuine self-sufficiency and indifference, her “inaccessible, impenetrable” and frightening allure, as she could be reduced to a mere strategist or a liar. According to Kofman this claim discloses more about Girard’s own psychology than about human desire in general.<sup>8</sup>

It is men, such as Girard (or Freud—in most of his other texts), who, because woman’s self-sufficiency is unbearable for them, imagine to themselves that it is purely a stratagem, an appearance, that her coquetry and beauty are only a supplementary adornment designated to trap men, and that the “flatness” itself always conceals at bottom some . . . penis-envy, some “desire for the other.”<sup>9</sup>

She concludes that Girard’s fear of female self-sufficiency is key in the polemic against Freud.<sup>10</sup>

These discrediting feminist critiques cast some doubt on the idea that it may be possible to rehabilitate Girard for feminism. Yet, as I will demonstrate below, this proves to be a productive space for Butler’s ideas. Her concept of performative gender can be fruitfully reconsidered in the light of Girard’s theory.

Let us start, however, with responding briefly to Moi and Kofman’s charges. On closer inspection, the analyses of both Moi and Kofman are flawed. One of the main problems in Moi’s criticism is that she continues to work within the Freudian paradigm, which Girard explicitly rejects. Girard does not ignore “the preoedipal stage” because it would undermine his theory, as Moi claims, but because he refuses entirely to work within a Freudian framework. As her point of departure is Freudian, she automatically collapses the distinction between acquisitive and non-acquisitive mimesis. This leads Moi to conclude that Girard needs to posit heterosexual desire as inherent to human beings in order to make his theory work. This is however not the case as I will demonstrate in this essay.

Furthermore, Girard's theory ignores feminine desire just as it does masculine desire, because it is concerned with the category of "human" and the universal human desire. Kofman, in turn, fails to see that the lack of self-sufficiency in her example of the Girardian coquette is not restricted to women only. Girard discusses "the snob" in the work of Proust, for example, as a figure for a masculine lack of self-sufficiency.<sup>11</sup> Thus Girard rejects human self-sufficiency altogether, rather than denying it to one particular sex. As I will show in this article, Girard's theory of mimesis offers for feminism new ways to conceptualize gender away from constraining and highly normative psychoanalytical discourse.

#### GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AS A SPECIAL CASE OF MIMESIS

Butler's concept of performativity bears an extensive similarity to Girardian mimesis. They are both mechanisms of continuous unwitting repetition of available models. The difference between these two concepts lies in their scope as well as their grounding in contrasting paradigms. Butler's performativity can be traced back to a collage of concepts and theories: Foucault's idea of episteme, Bourdieu's habitus, Derrida's citationality, Austin's speech act theory, and psychoanalysis. Girard's mimesis, in contrast, is an anthropological idea, which avoids any association with poststructuralist presuppositions and suggests a less elaborate theoretical support for what Butler demonstrated in her *Gender Trouble* (1990)—that is, the importance of imitating cultural norms that are embodied in others for the constitution of an identity. Butler's performativity seems to be a specific elaboration on the concept of Girard's mimesis. It is a more detailed and complex engagement with the problem of unwitting bodily citation (Derrida), and its political as well as cultural implications. The combination of Butler's performativity and Girard's mimesis allows for expanding the notion of gender performativity into the different sociopolitical fields of Girardian mimesis. The specificity of Butler's engagement with gender performativity, in turn, provides valuable insights into the concrete workings of mimesis. Butler offers a sophisticated and complex picture of psychological aspects of mimesis in her account of performativity—identity formation and the structure of the psyche. It is an account that resonates convincingly with Girard's ideas when disentangled from psychoanalytical elements.

The mechanism of mimesis produces "mimetic desire," in Girard's language, which functions in the form of a triangle involving two subjects

and an object of desire. The crucial assumption of Girard's mimetic situation is that the Other (the model) precedes the subject in her desire for an object. The prestige of a model-rival is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value. A subject unwittingly imitates the desire of this model for an object and starts to desire it as well. This is how our desire for an object is created. Girard's triangular desire demonstrates that desire originates neither in us nor in objects but in others, who, be they parents, friends, or colleagues, serve as models for the selection of an object. They also constitute models of behavior as they incorporate social norms and repeatedly enact them. On this very basic level, Girard and Butler share to the same extent the conviction that "social relations precede object relations and determine them."<sup>12</sup> We are born into an already populated world, where the "models" around us perform norms that they previously mimetically acquired by being in direct exposure to their Others. Without this basic sociality of coming into an already populated world, a human being cannot exist for either Butler or Girard. How this "selection" of models exactly works, and why we tend to imitate one set of social norms rather than another, is a question that Butler is particularly interested in. Girard, on his part, is more interested in the mechanism itself and how it plays out for whole communities across different cultural, temporal contexts.

For Girard, an adequate perspective on culture is one through mechanisms, that is, through the mechanism of mimesis that operates through incessant repetition. This is his stable universal, which is present in all cultures and at all times, and produces the impression of essences, depending on the cultural context and interpretation: the sexual drive, femininity, or violence. These essences give the impression of being natural and innate to humans in a particular culture. This includes the notion that to have a gender is an unquestionable fact of life and, related to that, ideas about what is considered as naturally feminine or masculine. It also covers questions about who counts as human and the very existence of the concept of the human. Girard argues against object-focused interpretations of culture. That is why he criticizes both Freud and Marx, because Freud constructs a theory based on sexual objects, and Marx interprets the world from the perspective of economic objects. In Girard's view, such procedure is an "erroneous schematization of culture."<sup>13</sup> He claims that the advantage of his mimetic theory is the elimination of the "false specificities of human being," that is, incest prohibition or an economic motive. From this

perspective, he considers himself an anti-essentialist and accuses Freud of multiplying essences if he cannot find a solution to his theoretical problems.

The mechanism of mimesis works within immanence, and as a result establishes the impression of an essence. Being, therefore, is an effect of mimesis, acquired in a continual bodily repetition, and as a result it effectuates being through sedimentation. In this respect, Girard's concept of mimesis has a strong resonance with Butler's idea of performativity and with her conceptualization of our relation to the other. Consider Butler's example of gender, which is also applicable to the operation of other norms: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."<sup>14</sup> The appearance of gender identity has been created through the sedimentation of gender norms, "sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another."<sup>15</sup> The subject does not actively choose to become a particular gender, as if she were choosing which clothes she will wear on a particular day, but rather her gender identity is an *effect* of the repeated practices of gender norms. Gender is acting through an unwitting imitation of the gendered behaviors of the others. The psychic subject is then "constituted internally by differentially gendered Others and is, therefore, never, as a gender, self-identical."<sup>16</sup> This mimetic mechanism works across all social norms and frameworks and leaves no exception. The practice of embodying norms is then a "compulsory practice, a forcible production,"<sup>17</sup> but not one that is fully determining. It is directed toward the outside world and the models that are available for unwitting imitation.

Girard claims that "to choose to be *oneself* is to choose to be the *Other*."<sup>18</sup> If Girardian terms were applied to Butler's ideas, Butler's "Other" could be seen to represent not only particular individuals but, more importantly, also the set of norms, "the regulatory law," which is embodied and performed by particular others. The individual at her birth is thrown into the "regulatory frame" and unwittingly imitates her surrounding models as she initially considers it "natural" to follow them.<sup>19</sup> The particular others "materializ[e] the norms,"<sup>20</sup> that is, through their acts they become cultural others. They are mediators who have already incorporated and are still in the process of incorporating the "regulatory law." As Girard claims: "no one can do without a highly developed mimetic capacity in acquiring cultural attitudes—in situating oneself correctly within one's culture."<sup>21</sup> The regulatory law is hence not only external but—more importantly—an

integrated internal law, which operates in the liminal zone between the external and internal spheres and is constitutive of identity. The bodily performance is where identity is to be found as a form of mimetic identification and reenactment. We are compelled to repeat the norms, such as specific behavior, dress, and social roles, which are found in culture and society because we are encircled by people who enact them and serve as models to us. In both Butler's concept of performativity and Girard's theory of mimesis, it is impossible for humans not to imitate a model and so not to repeat an incorporated norm. This, however, does not predetermine the result of such a repetition.

The reason for this lack of predetermination is a structural failure inherent to the process of mimesis. Both mimesis and gender performativity function by approximation. Butler's performativity is largely inspired by Derrida's idea of iterability/citatoriality, where the repeatability is conditioned by the failure to complete a perfect repetition.<sup>22</sup> The citation of gender norms—their appropriation and reenactment by a subject—may never be performed perfectly. “That [the] reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is *never quite complete*, that bodies *never quite comply* with the norms by which their materialization is impelled.”<sup>23</sup> (my italics). The slippage in performance is structurally unavoidable; thus “sex [and gender are] both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration,” as “gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions.”<sup>24</sup> These “gaps and fissures” are created by the inevitable difference between, on the one hand, prescribed sexual norms of gender identity (in the “regime of heterosexuality”), and, on the other, the successful approximation to this socially constructed model. In this space between the “ideal” norm and the performed act, gender variation and transformation are possible. This reveals the structurally intrinsic but necessary and useful failure in all “gender performatives.”

A similar mechanism can be identified in Girard's mimesis. In Girard's case, mimesis can be reduced to a process of unwitting imitation. Analogically to the mechanism of gender performativity, mimesis always goes wrong, and, structurally, it always has to go wrong to both repeat and preserve itself. It is an “internally discontinuous” process.<sup>25</sup> The inherent failure in performing a perfect mimesis results in significant consequences. The perfect imitation of a model, that is, perfect mimesis that would take place 100 percent of the time, is impossible not only because of the impossibility of an exact and flawless imitation but also because of decontextualization and temporality. A slippage in mimesis is structurally

unavoidable. An identity is produced and destabilized in the course of a reiteration. Gaps and fissures are created by the inevitable difference between, on the one hand, prescribed norms of particular identity in the regime of the established hegemony, and, on the other, the successful approximation to this socially constructed model. If we chose only one model, the perfect imitation would not be possible; with many models surrounding us, which we imitate unwittingly, the (unaccounted for) selectiveness introduces even more variety to our imitation process. Therefore, mimesis can only function through an approximation and exists as an approximation. The failure in mimesis is, therefore, inevitable and constitutive, and it can have a positive effect of spreading contagion of heterogeneity. Although this appears to be phrased in pejorative terms, this constitutes, paradoxically, one of the most important if not saving features of “peaceful” mimesis, as it allows us to grow different from each other.

Owing to the structural failure in performing perfect mimesis and perfect gender performance, it is possible for the “self” and gender to be constructed, identity preserved and further differentiated. This failure—the gap between successful approximation and perfect mimesis in gender performativity—is a space of subversion. Hence, in the case of gender performativity, gender transformation seen through the mechanism of mimesis would not operate within a binary system. Rather it would involve many degrees of “queering” occurring between different mediators, each characterized by their own unique mixture of queerness. As Butler remarks in *Gender Trouble*, queerness could be then understood not only as an example of citational politics but also as a reworking of the unintelligible into political agency. This is because to mimetically take up a form of conduct and go on repeating it with one’s body, a prior recognition of that behavior is not a prerequisite. That is where mimesis has a political promise.

#### CASE STUDY: A GIRARDIAN TAKE ON FREUD’S MASCULINE “LITTLE GIRL”

In his “Ego and the Super-Ego (Ego-Ideal)” (1923), Freud mentions in passing a masculine “little girl,” who poses problems to his theory of character formation. Instead of identifying with her mother and becoming a feminine little girl, she chooses her father and brings her “masculinity into prominence.”<sup>26</sup> In 1990 in her *Gender Trouble*, Butler takes up this essay and reads it against Freud. She does a brilliant deconstructive reading of the text to discuss the process of gender acquisition implicit in Freud’s piece. What



Butler erases in her interpretation, however, is the figure of the masculine “little girl” as a possibility of a transgender person. In this case study I will show that however problematic Butler attempts to make psychoanalytical presuppositions and however she tries to read Freud against himself, her subversive reformulations happen only within the bounds of the psychoanalytical framework. She questions the heterosexual matrix and the binary logic of male and female rather than actively exploring other modalities. In what follows I will demonstrate how a Girardian theory of mimetic desire offers a possibility to account for transgender desire and identification. In contrast to psychoanalysis, Girard’s theory of mimetic desire is a framework that does not efface the figure of the transgender but rather offers a way to account for Freud’s masculine “little girl” that both Freud and Butler struggle with theoretically.

Butler’s account of gender identity draws on the Freudian paradigm of ego formation through melancholia. She brings to our attention that Freud in “The Ego and the Super-Ego (Ego-Ideal)” does not only describe “character formation” but also the acquisition of gender identity. Freud claims that identification happens as a response to the loss of a loved object. To preserve it we install the lost object in the ego. Freud claims that in the process of ego formation a child desires one of its parents but the taboo against incest means that the desire has to be given up. Like the melancholic, who takes the loss into herself and thereby preserves it, a child preserves the desired and lost parent through identification. The ego in Freud is then a repository of all desires that had to be given up. As Freud puts it: “the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and . . . it contains the history of those object-choices.”<sup>27</sup> If the primary object of desire is the mother, then the identification will be with her, and if it is the father, then with him. Freud does not, however, determine why a child desires one parent rather than another, but he attributes it to a child’s “disposition”: either “feminine” or “masculine.” The disposition of the child is its innate desire for the member of the opposite or the same sex. However, Freud himself is hesitant about dispositions and gives an example of a “little girl” who identifies with her father, which brings “her masculinity into prominence.” It would seem that the primary object choice is the result of primary disposition, feminine or masculine to start with, and Butler rejects such postulations.<sup>28</sup> “Feminine” would mean identifying with the mother and desiring the father, and “masculine” identifying with the father and desiring the mother. She asks: “to what extent do we read the desire for the father as evidence of a feminine

disposition?”<sup>29</sup> Even though Freud suggests bisexuality as “originally present in the children,” it seems to Butler that bisexuality in Freud “is the coincidence of two heterosexual desires within a single psyche.”<sup>30</sup> The masculine disposition is never directed toward the father as an object of love, and the feminine disposition is never directed at the mother. Therefore, there must be, according to Butler, another prohibition at work that directs this gender identification and is the source of the problems that Freud encounters in accounting for identification.<sup>31</sup> Butler is interested in precisely those dispositions and how this primary object choice works.<sup>32</sup>

She proposes in this context the concept of a primary prohibition on homosexuality: heterosexuality and gender identification are established not only through implementing the incest prohibition but before that, through the prohibition on homosexuality.<sup>33</sup> As we know, for Freud identification with the same sex other is a psychic form of preserving the lost object. Due to cultural taboos against incest and homosexuality, our passionate attachment to the same sex person (mother or father) is rejected. A girl becomes a woman by losing her mother as a primary object of love. This giving up an object of love is only possible through a melancholic “bringing inside” of her mother through identification with her.<sup>34</sup> In case of a heterosexual union with the parent, the object of desire is denied but not the modality of desire (heterosexual desire). In consequence, desire is deflected to other objects of the opposite sex, constituting the normal process of mourning. In case of a homosexual union with the parent, both the object and the modality of desire require renunciation and so become subject to internalization through melancholia. In this way gender is acquired as the internalization of the prohibition on homosexuality. This identity is constructed and maintained by the consistent application of the taboo against homosexuality.<sup>35</sup> Thus, “homosexuality is *not* abolished but preserved, though preserved precisely in the prohibition on homosexuality,”<sup>36</sup> and gender identification is based on this set of disavowed attachments. Femininity is then formed through the refusal to grieve the feminine (the mother) as a possibility of love—“an exclusion never grieved, but ‘preserved’ through heightened . . . identification.”<sup>37</sup> A woman becomes a heterosexual melancholic where she refuses to acknowledge the attachment to the same sex, and so a strictly straight woman is the truest lesbian melancholic.<sup>38</sup> Butler finds this interesting because this account seems to follow from Freud’s own claims.<sup>39</sup>

To this Freudian interpretation, Butler importantly adds the surface of the body as the site where identification takes place.<sup>40</sup> Identification

happens through bodily acts of “incorporation of the Other by mimetic practice”:<sup>41</sup> “Identifications are always made in response to loss of some kind, and . . . they involve a certain *mimetic practice* that seeks to incorporate the lost love within the very ‘identity’ of the one who remains.”<sup>42</sup> As pointed out above, the choice of the model is directed by the taboo against homosexuality and, therefore, gender identification follows from the “acting out” of this prohibition. This constitutes precisely the difference between the melancholia caused by separation, death, or the breaking of an emotional tie and melancholia in the Oedipal situation. As Butler puts it in *Gender Trouble*: “In the Oedipal situation . . . the loss is dictated by a *prohibition* attended by a set of punishments.”<sup>43</sup> A child who enters the Oedipal drama with incestuous desires has already been subjected to the prohibition of homosexuality. “Hence, dispositions that Freud assumes to be primary or constitutive facts of sexual life are effects of a law which, internalized, produces and regulates discrete gender identity and heterosexuality.”<sup>44</sup> For Butler, therefore, gender identity is produced by an incorporation of the cultural prohibition on homosexuality. Although in 1990 she still explicitly concedes a doubt that “whether loss or mimetism is primary [is] perhaps an undecidable problem,”<sup>45</sup> it seems that a couple of years later, in 1997, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, she decides on loss. Our bodies enact this incorporated prohibition as femininity or masculinity, constituting a residue of this primary, most important loss.

From this perspective, Freud’s masculine “little girl” would either be a case of foreclosed homosexuality “gone wrong” or a strange case of a disavowed heterosexuality, where the little girl melancholically incorporates the masculine identity. I say a “strange” case because, as Butler herself points out, “in the case of prohibited heterosexual union, it is the object which is denied [the father] and not the modality of desire [heterosexual desire].”<sup>46</sup> That means that the desire should be transferred to other objects (that is, other men) without the melancholic incorporation of masculine gender that is without the identification with the father. As we can see, the case of masculine “little girl” fits uneasily with both Freud and Butler. A Girardian perspective offers a framework that accommodates this figure and allows it to be interpreted on its own terms.

To see how Girard tackles the problems ingrained in the psychoanalytical matrix, let us first make explicit the undercurrent of assumptions that Butler works with. First, for Freud and Butler, desire is always already there. That one desires is a precondition for the functioning of their systems. Second, Butler assumes that the taboo against

homosexuality permeates our culture and affects the structure of desire and identity irrespective of our immediate surrounding. The cultural prohibition on homosexuality produces the primary desire as homosexual. Third, she takes up the psychoanalytical assumption that the disavowed, like the Lacanian Real, structures our psyche. Fourth, that sexual desire is central to the formation of gender identity.

With Girard one can explain identification without recourse to a primary prohibition or initial desire or, to put it in more psychoanalytical terms, without turning to castration or lack. As already pointed out, desire is produced as a result of the mechanism of mimesis. Girard accounts for the Freudian Oedipus complex with the double bind of mimesis. In his view, there is no way for a child to distinguish between the behavior that is “good” to imitate (that is, nonacquisitive mimesis, imitating a model) and behavior that is not good to imitate (acquisitive mimesis that leads to mimetic rivalry and results in violence because it wishes to appropriate the object of desire). In the case of a disciple-master relationship, which Girard gives as an example of a double bind, the disciple imitates the master. This imitation is clearly expected in the educational process. However, once the disciple surpasses the master, the master will become hostile toward this disciple due to the emerging rivalry. The double bind takes place when a subject is incapable of correctly interpreting the double imperative that comes from the other person: as a model, imitate me; as a rival, do not imitate me.<sup>47</sup> In the Oedipus complex, Freud assumes that a child has an intrinsic desire for the mother and an inherent narcissism. Girard refuses Freudian essences and claims that the father is a model for apprenticeship, and this inevitably involves also being a model in terms of sexual desire. The child, in Girard’s view, does not know what it does when it imitates the father’s desire for the mother. It does not distinguish between imitation and rivalry. It is the adult’s interpretation, in this case Freud’s, that accuses the child of sexual desire for the mother, whereas the child, according to Girard, only unwittingly imitates a model, in this case, the father.<sup>48</sup>

In Girard’s system, therefore, gender identity would come from the nonacquisitive imitation of a model or models: mother or father, mother or mother, father or father. This would mean imitating a whole range of forms of conduct, norms embodied and repeated in their behaviors, and also, but not necessarily, the modality of their desires (be it homosexual or heterosexual). Nonacquisitive, peaceful mimesis could be in that case attached to the mechanism of gender identification and acquisitive mimesis to the modality of desire. A disjunction of gender identity and sexual

interest would be possible in such a framework, whereas it is impossible in either Freudian or Butlerian take. Let us, however, first think through the options that Girard's system proposes for the conflation of desire with identity that psychoanalysis makes. Let us also analyze the modalities of desire that are involved in Girardian triangulation. It is necessary to note that these are purely structural considerations.

Although Girard in his interpretations of literary study cases often works within the framework of heterosexual desire, his theory does not posit that heterosexual or homosexual desire is either primary or necessary. There is nothing originary or autonomous in desire, for Girard. Admittedly, Girard is neither interested in how homosexuality or heterosexuality is exactly produced through mimesis nor its truth relation to reality. His position is purely theoretical and, therefore, he is much more careful in pronouncing whether homosexuality is produced in that way or not. He straightforwardly admits that "we should subordinate homosexuality to the rivalry that *can* produce [homosexuality], no less frequently, does not produce it."<sup>49</sup> Girard tries, in his own way, to account for the influence of the mimetic game on "at least some of the forms of homosexuality." For Girard, homosexuality can be structurally related to mimetic rivalry as "the model and the rival, in the sexual domain, is an individual of the *same* sex, for the very reason that the object is heterosexual. All sexual rivalry is thus structurally homosexual."<sup>50</sup> In this case, what Girard calls homosexuality is the subordination of sexuality to the effects of the mimetic game of the double bind: the model is the rival and the rival is the model. "Any form of sexual rivalry is homosexual in structure . . . at least as long the object remains heterosexual."<sup>51</sup> In Girard's view, one should eliminate the false difference between homosexual and heterosexual eroticism as the rival is metamorphosed into an erotic object. Through his structural thinking, he detaches desire both from sex and from identification.

Both desires, homosexual and heterosexual, are produced in the triangular structure, depending on the constellation: a heterosexual configuration implies homosexual desire and a homosexual configuration implies heterosexual desire. The triangular mimetic structure involves both heterosexual and homosexual desire at the same time. Let us think this through step by step; first we consider a triangular mimetic structure involving two men, as models and rivals, and a woman as the object of desire. The constellation of departure here involves a heterosexual desire: both men desire a woman. One man admires the other and imitates his desire for the woman, and so he becomes a rival. Both imitate each other's

desires for the woman and intensify the involvement with each other. The fierce rivalry leads to the obsession with the rival rather than the object of desire, and leads to the eroticizing of the rival. This is how a heterosexual constellation involves inevitably a homosexual structure:

Homosexuality, in literary works, is often the eroticizing of mimetic rivalry. The desire bearing on the object of rivalry—an object that need not even be sexual—is displaced towards the rival. Since the rival need not necessarily be of the same sex—the object itself being not necessarily sexual—this eroticizing of rivalry can also take the form of heterosexuality.<sup>52</sup>

However, if the constellation of departure is homosexual, there are two options with different consequences. Let us start with the simpler one. If all three tips of the triangle are of one gender, all parties involved are either only women or only men, then the structure would inevitably be exclusively homosexual in nature. This poses no further problems. If, however, the constellation of departure is homosexual yet mixed: a man and a woman are rivals over a woman as an object of desire, then the rivalry is heterosexual in structure. Therefore, Girard claims that “there is no structural difference between the type of homosexuality and the type of heterosexuality that we are discussing at this point.”<sup>53</sup> Both desires are involved here. The interesting part, however, in this constellation is the question of identification that results from such a structure, and the question of the nature of desire. As Girard claims, obsessive rivalry can lead to becoming the double of the model-rival. If one conflates for a moment sexual desire with gender identity, as Butler does, then in the proposed above mixed homosexual structure of departure this would mean that a man, by imitating the desire of a woman for another woman, would become a male lesbian, and a woman, by imitating the desire of a man for a woman, would become a female straight man. This would then posit a structure of desire of a transgender person: a lesbian trapped in a male body, a straight man trapped in a female body.<sup>54</sup> The interesting part in such a triangular structure is that Girard’s structure of mimetic desire involves both desires operating at the same time if the parties are of a different gender, and that it is able to account for desire in a transgender person, whereas psychoanalysis is not. It could also account for a transgender desire of wanting to be a different gender irrespective of the modality of desire (homosexual or heterosexual) or irrespective of any sexual desire at all, if one does not conflate sexual desire with gender identity. This, in turn, would overlap with the transgender position where there is no necessary relationship between

gender identity and sexuality: “Trans people generally undergo gender reassignment without changing their sexual orientation—transsexual people are just as likely to be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual in their new gender role as any people are. . . . There is no relationship to sexuality.”<sup>55</sup>

One can observe here how Girard’s model accounts for the constellations that Butler is interested in throughout her work—the transgender—but that she does not, and cannot, fully explore using the psychoanalytical framework. She deals with the prohibition on incest and homosexuality, but with psychoanalysis she lacks the tools to account for a transgender position. The question of identification in transgender does not make itself available for conceptualization with Freud, and one wonders if it is a necessary specter that has to haunt Butler’s system.<sup>56</sup> Transgender desire is unintelligible from within psychoanalysis because there are only two options possible in that framework: homosexuality and heterosexuality, man and woman. However problematic Butler has tried to make those psychoanalytical presuppositions, her subversive reading could only lead her reformulation to occur within the bounds of the psychoanalytical framework: questioning the heterosexual matrix and the binary logic of male and female rather than actively exploring other modalities. This is particularly visible in Butler’s take on Freud’s “little girl.” It is necessary to ask, this time perhaps more of Butler than of Freud, why the masculinity of the little girl could not possibly be read as a case of foreclosed transsexuality rather than as a foreclosed homosexuality “gone wrong” (or foreclosed heterosexuality)? “Sigmund Freud never discussed transsexualism *per se*,”<sup>57</sup> yet Butler has, and this foreclosure in Butler could be considered problematic from the transgender perspective.<sup>58</sup> Butler pays little attention to the case of the masculine “little girl” in Freud’s text, and so, in a way, she erases the figure of the transgender person here. My claim is that this erasure is enabled by psychoanalysis. This is perhaps why Butler does not account for transgender as well as she could if she employed a different framework, despite that transgender and violence toward transgender people is such an important preoccupation to her thinking. Transgender serves as the abject that panics heteronormativity. Yet, the mechanisms of transgender identity are not explored as much as the mechanisms of homosexuality and heterosexuality, masculinity and femininity.

There is a profound conservative normativity in psychoanalysis that is at variance with Butler’s theoretical interests, and the Girardian theory

offers a possibility of overcoming it. Girard's model is able to account for different modalities of being and of desire: for being a man, a woman, or a third entity, and for desiring homosexually, heterosexually, and polysexually. Butler makes the connection desire-loss and prohibition-identity through Freud to show how unacknowledged loss structures who we are. She makes a similar point in *Precarious Life* (2006), where she transposes Freud's mourning and melancholia to think about "ungrievable lives," about the unintelligible that constitutes who we are, and who counts as living. From a Girardian perspective, the pathways of desire and identity do not necessarily have to overlap. Desire is constructed through mimesis and identity is constructed through mimesis, but there is a whole spectrum of gender identity that is not constructed as a result of sexual desire, prohibited or not. In mimesis, the spectrum of gender behavior is as broad as the scope of the model's desires and behaviors. If the female model is asexual, then a child will imitate her femininity together with other behaviors without necessarily desiring homosexually or heterosexually (or sexually at all). Hence the link desire-identity is much weaker in Girardian theory than it is in Butler, and it forecloses the possibility of a formative primary experience. For Girard, it is the violence in coming to terms with a double bind that structures us, in that we are exposed to context-dependent punishments. The mistakes we make in particular situations, where we accidentally entangle ourselves in rivalry rather than imitation, have as much influence on us, if not more, as has the incest taboo or taboo on homosexuality embedded in our culture. Butler's argument about primary prohibitions rules out the constitutive importance of the private dynamics between models and rivals. Such private dynamics, however, directly manage both desire and identity.

The question that remains to be posed is how or why we come to select one model rather than another, how we come to repeat one set of norms and conventions rather than another. Girard avoids any kind of possible psychological explanation on the level of an individual. For him, "it is hopeless to attempt to isolate the three elements of mimetic desire: identification, choice of object, and rivalry," as they always appear together.<sup>59</sup> His theory coincides with that of Butler's in that they both think that identification is directed by cultural norms and that the structures of prohibition regulate the choice of object. Girard would, however, add a collective factor to this dynamic that Butler leaves aside.<sup>60</sup> The importance of a collective dynamic is key for Girard in directing both desire and identification. It is the others around the subject that activate the norms



through repeating them in their behaviors. The norms that are enacted by a collectivity around a subject offer a particular set of conventions and regulations for this subject. It is this set of possibilities that a subject will take as a mimetic basis for performing his own unwitting repetition. This repetition is never merely mechanical. Even in the strictest arrangement of conventions, however, there is a possibility of variation, and this is because mimesis is never perfect but it is always an approximation.

#### BUT WHAT ABOUT LACAN AND BUTLER?

Scholars who find Butler's engagement with psychoanalysis productive may respond that the influence of Lacan on Butler is far more salient than that of Freud. Butler embraces the linguistic turn in psychoanalysis undertaken by Lacan and radicalizes it, notably in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004).<sup>61</sup>

Due to the space limitations I can only briefly respond to this potential critique. The relation of Butler to Lacan merits a separate, detailed analysis. My claim is, in short, that neither Freud nor Lacan is particularly conducive to Butler's theoretical aims and aspirations. Hence, she needs Girard. I will only name four questions where psychoanalysis seems to continue to constrain Butler rather than offer her new theoretical possibilities.<sup>62</sup> First, the question of materiality, as Butler herself admits, constantly escapes her: "I confess . . . that I am not a very good materialist. Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language"<sup>63</sup> and this, I would argue, is very much due to the ongoing influence of Lacan on her philosophical position. Second, the problem with materiality, in turn, makes it very difficult for her to think about questions of collectivity and politics, which have become important in her more recent work. Butler wants to discuss the body and physical agency but she constantly falls into the discursive materiality that she inherited from Foucault, Derrida and, importantly, Lacan. There is an abstraction in this materiality that disables thinking about social activism, collectivity and political practice. We can observe this intense focus on the intimate connection between materiality and language when she discusses injurious language in *Excitable Speech*.<sup>64</sup> She examines the physicality of injury that is caused by racial slurs, and how body performativity can subvert this hurt. The same theoretical fusion happens in *Bodies that Matter*, where she examines body and materiality by analyzing discourse. This direct connection of collectivity to bodies, and bodies to language brings Butler to an impasse and prevents her from

making any affirmative claims concerning social transformation based on collectivity. Agency and responsibility are always an individual affair of one constantly engaged with the many: the many in their bodily presence around us, in language we were taught by them to speak, in norms that we incorporated by imitating others. Butler's commitment to the individual performativity as a political tool prevents her from thinking collectivity. This is a serious problem for a socio-political thinker that Butler now aspires to be. Elsewhere, I trace back this problem to the influence of Lacan rather than Foucault on her ideas. Third, Butler claims in *Undoing Gender* that it is essential to keep "the notion of the 'human' open to a future articulation."<sup>65</sup> She admits in an interview: "I want to propose 'precarious life' as a non-anthropocentric framework for considering what makes life valuable."<sup>66</sup> And if this is really the case that her theory is "struggling toward a non-anthropocentric conception of the human," as I believe it is, then it is doubtful that Lacan is the most useful philosophical choice to achieve that goal. Fourth, despite Butler's frequent discussion of the transgender in *Undoing Gender*, Butler still has problems with accounting for transgender identity as an identity operating in its own terms. She often uses the transgender as a means to expose the fake naturalness of gender and heterosexuality and for such use of the transgender Butler has been harshly criticized by the transgender community.<sup>67</sup> Butler redefines and subverts Lacanian concepts, for instance by proposing an idea of the lesbian phallus, however it is difficult not to agree with Didier Eribon who claims that instead of investing so much energy and intellectual sophistication towards reformulating the key-concepts of the psychoanalytical doctrine, it would have been perhaps more productive and efficient for Butler to refuse these concepts pertinence.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

To look at gender through Girard's concept of mimesis proves to be extremely instructive. From the analysis proposed above it is fair to assume that we perform gender as we perform mimesis: in an unwitting fashion using the set of possibilities available in culture. Girard's theory offers an engaging perspective on Butler's gender performativity. Although Butler considers psychoanalysis central to "any project that seeks to understand emancipatory projects in both their psychic and social dimensions,"<sup>69</sup> I tried to show in this article that this is not necessarily the case. As is argued, psychoanalysis is not able to account for a whole spectrum of social and

political situations, and Girard enabled us to push Butler's thinking in directions that were foreclosed by her psychoanalytical preoccupations. The question of the transgender was as an example of the limits that psychoanalysis imposes on Butler. Through my detailed discussion of the transgender, I tried to detach Butler from Freud and demonstrate how Girard can offer Butler new possibilities for thinking about gender and identification that psychoanalysis does not make possible. Girard's mimetic theory constitutes a possible path for establishing an alternative framework for conceptualizing gender, queer theory, and transgender studies. Exactly in this sense Girard seems to be at least partly rehabilitated for feminism and entirely for transgender studies. The advantage of mimesis lies precisely in its ability to overcome psychoanalytical impasses and open up completely new conceptual possibilities.

#### NOTES

1. Richard Joseph Golsan, *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 113.
2. Toril Moi, "The Missing Mother: The Oedipal Rivalries of René Girard," *Diacritics* 12, no. 2 (1982): 27.
3. Golsan, *René Girard and Myth*, 113.
4. Moi, "The Missing Mother," 27.
5. Moi, "The Missing Mother," 28.
6. Moi, "The Missing Mother," 28.
7. Moi, "The Missing Mother," 21.
8. Golsan, *René Girard and Myth*, 114.
9. Sarah Kofman, "The Narcissistic Woman: Freud and Girard," *Diacritics* 10, no. 3 (1980): 42.
10. Golsan, *René Girard and Myth*, 115.
11. On "the snob" and triangular desire, see René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1961), 31–33, 221–30.
12. Andrew J. McKenna, *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 80.
13. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (London: Athlone, 1987), 75.
14. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 45.

15. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.
16. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Judith Butler and Sara Salih (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 133.
17. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 231.
18. René Girard and Mark R. Anspach, *Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 28.
19. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 12.
20. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 16.
21. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 290.
22. Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Context, Event," in *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 7.
23. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 1–2.
24. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 10.
25. Girard discusses the continuity and discontinuity in mimesis in his "Innovation and Repetition": "The Latin word *in-novare* implies limited change rather than total revolution—a combination of continuity and discontinuity... To expect novelty to cleanse itself of imitation is to expect a plant to grow with its roots up in the air." René Girard, *Mimesis and Theory*, ed. Robert Doran (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008), 244.
26. Sigmund Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis: "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," "The Ego and the Id" and other Works*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1991), 11:372.
27. Freud, *On Metapsychology*, 368.
28. See Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London: Routledge, 2002), 52–56; and Freud, *On Metapsychology*, 372.
29. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 82.
30. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 82.
31. For the problems Freud has with positing the source of identification, see Freud, *On Metapsychology*, 371–72; and Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 78–89.
32. Butler often uses examples of the female Oedipus complex structure because, from the perspective of her reading, the male Oedipus complex has a more complicated double displacement; see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 127–38. From a Girardian perspective, however, the difference between the female and male Oedipus complex is irrelevant, and that is why I do not follow the psychoanalytically based distinction between the male and female Oedipus.
33. See Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 135.
34. Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 134.

35. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 86.
36. See Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 135–42.
37. Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 146.
38. See Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 147. Butler acknowledges that “a homosexual for whom heterosexual desire is unthinkable” will maintain his or her heterosexual desire through melancholic incorporation. However, due to different cultural sanctions toward homosexuality and heterosexuality, the two types of melancholia are not equivalent (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 95; see Salih, *Judith Butler*, 57).
39. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 199–200.
40. See Salih, *Judith Butler*, 56; and Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 86.
41. Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 132–33.
42. Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 132.
43. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 87.
44. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 87.
45. Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 133.
46. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 79.
47. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 291.
48. See Girard, *Things Hidden*, 352.
49. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 345.
50. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 335.
51. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 337.
52. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 346–47.
53. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 347.
54. For a Girardian analysis of male lesbianism, see Iwona Janicka, “Homosocial Bonds and Narrative Strategies in Adolphe Belot’s *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* (1870),” *Romanica Silesiana* 8, no. 1 (2013): 138–50.
55. Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identity* (Reading, England: South Street, 2000), 19.
56. On how Butler misreads Freud, see Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 40–42.
57. Vernon A. Rosario II, “Trans(Homo) Sexuality? Double Inversion, Psychiatric Confusion, and Hetero-Hegemony,” in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, ed. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 38.
58. For a transgender critique of Butler, see Prosser, *Second Skins*; Jay Prosser, “Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 257–80; Ki Namaste, “‘Tragic Misreadings’: Queer Theory’s Erasure of Transgender,” in

- Queer Studies*, 183–203; and Viviane K. Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
59. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 180.
  60. McNay, for instance, criticizes Butler “for [a] debilitating emphasis on an individualistic conception of political practice as a matter of displacement and resistance.” See Gill Jagger, *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 2008), 105; and Lois McNay, *Against Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).
  61. I would like to thank an anonymous *Contagion* reviewer for this point of critique.
  62. For a detailed theoretical support of the following claims, see my *Contagious Habits. Mimetic Social Transformation and Solidarity in the 21st Century* (forthcoming).
  63. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 198.
  64. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).
  65. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 222.
  66. Judith Butler, Pierpaolo Antonello, and Roberto Farneti, “Antigone’s Claim: A Conversation With Judith Butler,” *Theory and Event* (2009): 12.
  67. Namaste goes as far as to say: “Clearly, as scholars and as activists, we need to challenge Butler’s negation of transgender identity” (Namaste, “Tragic Misreadings,” 188). This “negation of transgender identity” does not change after the publication of *Undoing Gender*.
  68. Cf. Didier Eribon, *Échapper à la psychanalyse* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2005), 82–83.
  69. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 14.