GENDER (AND SPECIES) SUBVERSION IN BOWIE'S "DIAMOND DOGS"

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In "Acting in Concert," the introduction to her book *Undoing Gender,* theorist Judith Butler argues that humans "perform" gender in order to gain social recognition. She cites the Hegelian notion that "it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially-viable beings," adding that "recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced" depending on the "recognizability" of its race, sex, and morphology (Butler 2). Under these systems of categorization, certain humans are recognized as less than human, or, if deemed entirely "illegible," not human at all (Butler 5).

Legendary musician David Bowie's career reads as an exercise in this social illegibility. From the 1960s to 80s, Bowie simultaneously perplexed and fascinated audiences with the ambiguity of his sexual and gender identities—donning androgynous costumes and making vague, often contradictory statements about his sexual orientation. At times, too, he seemed to blur the lines between human and nonhuman—portraying an alien with piercing yellow cat eyes in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and an evil elf king in *Labyrinth*.

Bowie took both this species and gender ambiguity to the extreme with the gatefold cover of his 1974 album *Diamond Dogs*. In the image, a nearly photo-realistic painting by the Belgian artist Guy Peellaert, Bowie is naked and stretched seductively across a stage, staring directly at his audience. His upper body, pictured on the front of the record, exemplifies his famously gender-bending aesthetic; his feminine jewelry, striking makeup, and long, dyed hair contrast with his harshly masculine bone structure and skeletal frame. This blending of gender roles is already grounds for the social illegibility (and therefore social unviability) that Butler describes. However, on the back side of the record, Bowie subverts species divisions as well: his deformed torso morphs into the haunches of a hound. Above, a shadow obscures his genitals. This juxtaposition of gender, species, and sex ambiguity questions the relationship between gender and species categorization. While we could read the image simply as a metaphor for Butler's notion that schemes of social categorization cast deviants as less than human, I argue that the image also pushes the connections between gender and species divisions one step further: gender binaries actually stem from human's attempts to differentiate themselves from animals and the natural world. Thus, I propose, a rethinking of gender necessitates a rethinking of the way we relate to the nonhuman.

The creature on the cover of *Diamond Dogs* escapes total recognition by its audience due to the improbable coexistence of supposed "opposites" within its body. From one end of Bowie's body to the other is the contrast between the structured, angular arms of the man and the relaxed, open legs of a dog, and yet the artist unites these

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contrasting elements seamlessly through the uniform color, texture, and shine of the hybrid body. This uncanny synthesis likely provokes confusion or even disgust for the viewer—the creature subverts their methods of recognizing and categorizing the "human" as distinct from the "animal" at the same time as its feminine upper-body collapses the distinctions between "man" and "woman." Beyond physical differences, this pairing of man and dog is also associated with a host of philosophical dichotomies: man as domesticator, dog as domesticated, man as civilization and dog as wildness, man as intelligence and dog as instinct. These value distinctions further parallel the "power differentials embedded in the construction of the category of the 'human'"—differentials between the categories of male and female, white and black, able and disabled (Butler 13). Both those who fall on the less powerful side of these binaries, as well as those who can't be identified under either category, are *lowered* to the status of "inhuman" or "less than human," a designation that alone signals the anthropocentrism embedded in human social categorization.

Butler herself challenges this anthropocentric thought in her discussion of anti-abortion activists' use of the term "human life," a term that, she notes, we often use to privilege human lives over those of other animals (12). She points out the paradox in the use of the term: "For the human to be human, it must relate to what is nonhuman, to what is outside itself but continuous with itself by virtue of an interimplication in life . . . so that the human exceeds its boundary in the very effort to establish them" (Butler 12). *Diamond Dogs* is a physical manifestation of this "interimplication," shocking audiences with the coexistence of the "human" and its supposed opposite, the "inhuman" or "animal," within one body. The image offends the viewer because the "human" is devalued by its interimplication with the animal—a collapse of the neatly distinguished power hierarchy between man and beast. By challenging these distinctions in an image in which he also blurs gender lines, Bowie's image also draws a connection Butler never explicitly makes: like the terms "human" and "non-human," which also share a root word, the concepts of "female" and "male" only exist through a division that simultaneously links the two, as each depends on the other for meaning. The shared basis of gender and species divisions lies in an attempt to assign power and meaning to a discrete identity by establishing an opposite, an identity which is the "other," but which ultimately cannot be entirely separated from the "self." Binary categorization—especially as a tool of exclusion—therefore denies this "interimplication," an acknowledgement of which would provide a more inclusive framework for valuing lives.

The causal relationship between natural and social hierarchies can also be observed in society's obsession with reproductive capabilities, a topic that *Diamond Dogs* provokes through the ambiguity of Bowie's genitals. A common justification for the enforcement of gender and sexual binaries comes from the reproductive necessity of complimentary sexual organs—after all, as Butler points out, "sexual difference is an essential part of any account a human may come up with about his or her origin" (10).

The biological separation of "species" is likewise determined by which animals can mate with each other and which cannot. Thus, the survival and persistence of a "species" as a cohesive and continuous and discrete unit, separate from other wild and "subhuman" creatures, depends on the reproductive capability and therefore sexual binarism of its population. As Butler notes, non-reproductive people—such as gays and lesbians—as well as people who don't match the sexual binary, are thus considered "less than human" because they aren't able to contribute to the narrative around, or the physical proliferation of, a separate and superior human species (10). Similarly, the ambiguity of Bowie's genitals in *Diamond Dogs* renders him even *less* human and more perplexing. How does he mate? Who does he mate with? Who mated to produce him? The reproductive boundaries of species are disintegrated, to the confusion and revulsion of his audience. This intolerant reaction suggests that in order to replace constraining conceptions of gender and sex, we must rethink our conceptions of what separates the human from the inhuman, adopting an attitude that embraces an overall "continuum," an "interimplication," rather than division, of life.

This radical vision for inclusion seems impossible under our current conceptions of species, and is therefore akin to the utopian "potentialities" of performance that Jose Muñoz discusses in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. While Butler probes the everyday performance of normative gender roles, Muñoz's work explores the opportunities for gender transgression possible in literal, staged musical performances. In the chapter "Stages," Muñoz analyzes images of queer and punk clubs, scouting for details that suggest "potentialities"—possibilities that "do not exist in present things," and which have a temporality he calls "futurity" (99). Through the enactment of potentialities, stages become "utopian rehearsal rooms," where individuals can "work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics" (Muñoz 111)—selves that are, as Butler would put it, "illegible" under current, dominant identity frameworks and which thus transcend the social "recognition" Butler discusses. Muñoz therefore offers a solution to the seemingly "impossible" project that Butler identifies—of changing our entire ontological positioning toward the natural world.

The creature of *Diamond Dogs* embodies the temporality of Muñoz's potentialities. Bowie disturbs our notions of temporality with the setting of the image, through what Muñoz calls "a use of past decadence to critique the banality of our presentness" (111). In the image, Bowie is laying on a freak show stage, backed by a banner that reads "Strangest Living Curiosities." During their heyday, freak shows epitomized the exploitation of "deviants" who didn't fit into normal somatic and social codes, and who as a result were treated as less than human. However, in *Diamond Dogs,* the Bowie creature doesn't appear manipulated or the object of cruelty; rather, he dominates the stage with his radiance and beauty, staring confidently back at those who might gawk at him. The temporal setting of *Diamond Dogs* is not clear—is the image from the past, as the old-fashioned carnival stage suggests? Or from the future, where creatures like

this are powerful and revered? Bowie thus juxtaposes an archaic and oppressive setting with his radical, species-subverting "potentiality" in order to question the inevitability and naturalness of our present notions about species divisions. After all, we no longer consider freak shows sensitive—will there come a day when "freaks" are actually celebrated? When species and gender divisions are no longer enforced? The liminal temporality of the image—mirrored in the liminality of a body that hovers between human and animal, recognizable and unrecognizable—suggests this "potentiality," even as it seems unlikely or even impossible under our current essentialist conceptions of species.

The creation of this utopian potentiality is politically powerful in and of itself, but if we consider the financial success of *Diamond Dogs,* we may also be able to spot the beginnings of its actualization. Audiences, fascinated by the image, made the album a best-seller. This wasn't simply a modern-day freak show, either; these audiences admired and respected Bowie for his "freakishness," and enriched him because of it. The appeal of this image comes, in part, from its clear sexuality—its suggestive pose and golden muscle contours are reminiscent of traditional pin-up calendars or strip club ads. The image's sexuality thus becomes a site for utopian realization when we consider that, despite being recognizably *sexual*, the creature is not recognizably *human;* furthermore, it has no apparent reproductive capability. The creature has no potential to further the human species—and yet it still provokes desire or at least suggests the *potential* for a sexual encounter—a sexual "interimplication." By inviting his audience to be *desirous* of a body that is not recognizably human, Bowie creates a "potentiality" for a "time and a place where their desires are not toxic," just like the punk clubs Muñoz explores (105). We can imagine a time where sex and gender need not be defined by human reproduction, where the non-reproductive can still be recognized, accepted, empathized with. Thus, the sexuality of the image results in a mental realization of potentiality—a moment of utopia in which we are continuous with the nonhuman, and it feels good. It feels exciting.

The image thus forces us to re-orient our interaction with things that disgust us on the basis of not being "human enough"—and therefore to reorient our interaction with the criteria that defines gender and sexuality. Even if we aren't able to actually, physically, blend ourselves with animals, it is the creation of a mindset that acknowledges our "continuity" with them that is important in creating a more inclusive and humane present for all people and beings. As Butler writes in the introduction to her book *Undoing Gender*, "there is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human" (3-4); Muñoz offers a strategy and a locale for this transformation when he writes "utopian performativity suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished" (99). Bowie, like Muñoz's subjects, brings this process to the stage, where he can exist comfortably in a "futurity" in which the boundaries between human and animal are dissolved. *Diamond*

Dogs thus departs from the human in order to remake the way we conceive the human at all, opening up a radical "potentiality" for inclusion.

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