

Masculinity as Masquerade: "Gay" Macho in the Novels of Jean Genet

Elizabeth Stephens

Department of Critical and Cultural Studies, Macquarie University

This paper examines the representation of macho masculinity found in Jean Genet's novels through the framework of theories of gender performativity. While Genet's novels have been condemned by contemporary gay critics for representing homosexuality as an abject or failed masculinity, it is argued that emphasis on this aspect of his work has tended to overshadow the importance of the virile, phallic man to his work. Genet's homoeroticisation of machismo provides a focus for analysis of his representation of masculinity as a whole, and especially of the relationship between heterosexual and homosexual men found in his novels. Rather than reading Genet's representation of macho as a specifically "gay" macho that confirms the heterocentric privileging of heterosexual masculinity, this paper argues that, in Genet's novels, all macho is represented as inherently performative in a way that questions the logic of heterocentric privilege.

For the first time he began to doubt that this invisible power, his ideal, which he served and behind which he sheltered himself, might only be composed of human weaknesses (Genet 1990c, 51).

INTRODUCTION

Genet's novels occupy an anomalous position within gay literature and criticism. While they represent some of the most graphic and confronting accounts of male homosexuality written in their time, contemporary gay theorists have tended to dismiss his works for perpetuating heterocentric - if not actively homophobic - assumptions about male homosexuality. Christopher Robinson's *Scandal in the Ink: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century French Literature* is characteristic of this, framing Genet's work as part of the "black side" of gay literature's (pre)history. Once seen as an innovator because of the sexually explicit nature of his work and its rupture with the tradition of anonymous homosexual apologies (such as Gide's *Corydon*), Genet's novels have come to be read by a younger generation of gay writers as "at best obsolete, at worst pandering to heterosexual prejudice" (Robinson 1995, 58). Alan Sinfield continues this reading of Genet's work in *Gay and After*, in which he argues that Genet's conflation of the homosexual and the outlaw perpetuates the very assumptions about homosexual men that contemporary gay studies would critique (Sinfield 1998, 129-45). One of the reasons Genet's representation of homosexuality seems "so recent and yet so distant" (White 1996, 4) is his tendency to depict homosexual characters as simultaneously abject and feminised, in a way that seems to reinforce heterocentric assumptions about male homosexuality.¹

There is much in Genet's work to encourage such a reading: Divine in *Our Lady of the Flowers* continues to prostitute herself for Darling even after he has left her for Our Lady; the narrators of *Miracle of the Rose* and *The Thief's Journal* slavishly devote themselves to brutal, bullying men; Lieutenant Seblon in *Querelle of Brest* grows more besotted with Querelle as the latter becomes more insolent and disdainful. Such a pattern in Genet's work appears to establish a homoerotic system in which an "avowed homosexual" (Genet 1990c, 74) debases himself before a masterful macho man, who maintains a heterosexual identity (independent of whether or not he engages in same-sex practices). Genet's works thus seem to represent a dichotomised masculinity, as Edmund White recognises in his biography *Genet*, in which: "The 'heterosexual' partner regards his lover as a 'pal'... whereas the 'homosexual,' while pretending to be just a pal, secretly imagines that someday they'll be married or that they are already married. This incongruity is the source of much pathos in Genet's fiction" (White 1993, 361-61). This incongruity is also the reason that critics like Robinson and Sinfield see Genet's works as mapping the ideas of masculinity and femininity onto heterosexuality and homosexuality, effectively heterosexualising homosexuality. In this paper, however, I want to focus analysis on Genet's representations of homosexuality through a reading of his homoeroticisation of macho masculinity. One of the most intriguing aspects of Genet's writing, I will argue, is that they are often most disruptive where they appear to be most conventional, and this is exemplified in his representations of machismo. It is precisely in his rapturous panegyrics to the virile, muscular man that Genet's novels most problematise the heterocentric assumptions underlying heterosexual masculinity's privilege.

MACHO AND HOMOEROTICISM IN GENET'S NOVELS

The figure of the muscular man is at the centre of all Genet's novels, composed as rapturous paeans to machismo. Alphonso Lingis beautifully evokes the tone of Genet's homoerotics in "Love Songs," in which he claims Genet's novels are not so much written as "sung with voices wet with kisses and semen" (Lingis 1997, 168). Genet himself describes his work as a reverent "hymn" to dominant masculinity (Genet 1964, 174), before which he literally prostrates himself: "I worship him," he writes of Darling. "When I see him lying naked, I feel like saying mass on his chest" (1990a, 71). In *The Thief's Journal*, he rhapsodises his love "for all the manly types: the soldier, the sailor, the adventurer, the thief, the criminal," recognising that these (arche)types form the basis of his homoeroticism (1964, 43). The ideal lover, for Genet, is always one of the "manly types." In the ballet scenario *Adame Miroir*, the lead dancer is a "young and beautiful" sailor: "His muscles are hard but supple: in short he is for us the ideal lover" (1992, 35). In "Fragments d'un discours," Genet similarly describes his ideal lover as an "[i]mpudent and beautiful" hoodlum, lounging on street corners with dangerous grace (1990d, 71). This image of the dazzling tough is evoked repeatedly, and in almost identical terms, in all Genet's novels. The question with which this paper is concerned, then, is what this homoeroticisation of macho reveals about Genet's representation of masculinity and his understanding of male homosexuality.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Genet's characterisation of macho masculinity is its highly-aestheticised quality. The stylised form of the ballet used in *'Adame Miroir* pervades many of Genet's texts: the narrative of *Our Lady of the Flowers*, he writes, "should be danced, mimed... ma[d]e a ballet" (1990a, 61). All Genet's characters - heterosexual and homosexual, macho and dandy - similarly move and act within a limited register, or repertoire, of behaviours. This aspect of his work has led a number of Genet's literary critics to protest the artificiality of his characterisations. Bettina Knapp, for instance, argues that Divine "moves about in [*Our Lady of the Flowers*] as a gesture, image, or presence and emerges as thinly drawn and hollow as all the other characters" (1968, 27; see also Storzer 1979, 201; Coe 1968, 41). Genet himself not only recognises but also foregrounds the brittleness of his characterisations, describing Darling and Divine as living "a life that a breath might shatter" (Genet 1990a, 139). The apparent artificiality of Genet's characters results primarily from their conventional, theatrical behaviour. Thus Darling and Our Lady, dressed as dandified hoods, "knew that they were characters in a movie" (1990a, 103), while the port of Brest is a "theatre" (1990c, 7), and the Mettray reform school is a "house of illusions" (1971, 176).

Genet's eroticisation of macho can hence be seen, in the first instance, to have a two-fold effect: on the one hand, it celebrates macho without (explicitly) contesting its privilege; but, on the other, it repeatedly suggests that the source of this macho is theatrical or even illusory. Genet himself, it should be noted, seems perplexed by this ambiguity in his work. In *The Thief's Journal*, he puzzles:

If I am accused of using such theatrical props as funfairs, prisons, flowers, sacrilegious pickings, stations, frontiers, opium, sailors, harbours, urinals, funerals, cheap hotel rooms, of creating mediocre melodramas and confusing poetry with cheap local colour, what can I answer?... The aforementioned props are steeped in the violence of men, in their brutality.... They are animated by male gestures. (1964, 266)

When Genet tries to account for his theatricalised representations of masculinity, then, he can only suggest that certain spaces (or arenas) are suffused with men's "violence" and "brutality." But when he attempts to represent those spaces, he finds himself facing an edifice of painted sets and cheap props. However, if this makes Genet's novels "mediocre melodramas," they remain distinguished from other examples of their genre by the eroticisation of machismo in which they are based.

How this should be read within the context of homosexual literature is the subject of some debate. While a small number of gay writers and critics, such as Richard Howard, have celebrated Genet's novels (above his plays, poetry or political writing) as "the first and perhaps the only texts to set forth for the Western imagination an explicit realisation of homosexual eros" (Howard 1986, 41), others have argued that his representation of homosexuality is rigidly conventional. Michael Lucey, in his excellent essay on *Our Lady of the Flowers*, argues that Genet's work seems imprisoned in "an erotic script that never changes, that suffers no inflections," in which Genet's homosexual characters abject themselves before powerful, macho men (Lucey 1997, 83). Of his first encounter with the burly Armand in *The Thief's Journal*, for instance, Genet recalls: "Crushed by that mass of flesh ... I experienced the giddiness of finally meeting the perfect brute"

(Genet 1964, 134). And in *Querelle of Brest*, Querelle is so overcome by the herculean physique of the policeman Mario that he becomes "seized with dizziness before the power of this flesh and muscle he dimly perceived towering above him" (1990c, 32). Genet's celebration of the dominance of the phallic body is hardly unique in homosexual literature, it should be noted, and has also been identified - with some unease - in a variety of gay sub-cultures. As Gregg Blachford argues in "Male Dominance and the Gay World," the gay privileging of machismo seems to simply reproduce heterocentric power structures, to constitute "an eroticisation of the very values of straight society that have tyrannised [homosexual men's] own lives" (Blachford 1981, 203).²

The privileging of macho in homosexual communities, like that seen in Genet's novels, raises an important question: whether the homoeroticisation of dominant men can be seen to subvert traditional ideas about masculinity, by objectifying it and by challenging its assumed heterocentrism; or whether, on the contrary, this eroticisation merely reinforces how intractable and seductive the power of dominant masculinity is. When, in *Querelle of Brest*, Genet muses: "is it really possible that I may someday hold naked in my arms, and continue to hold close-pressed to my body, the young men whose mettle and daring place them so high in my esteem that I long to throw myself at their feet and grovel before them?" the terms of this debate can be clearly seen (1990c, 11). Genet's homoeroticisation of macho masculinity is problematically coupled, here as elsewhere, with an apparently uncritical reconfirmation of the natural dominance of that masculinity. Thus Genet's representations of macho can be seen to perpetuate a heterocentric hierarchisation of masculinities, in which a phallic heterosexuality is represented as "naturally" superior and homosexuality as abject and debased. Yet Genet's theatricalisation of macho masculinity also problematises the assumptions about naturalness and authenticity on which its traditional privilege is based. It does this not by explicitly challenging or subverting the naturalness of heterosexual masculinity, but rather by undermining the distinction between the natural and theatrical that allow such distinctions to be made: "To be natural," Our Lady reflects during his trial, "was to be theatrical" (Genet 1990a, 223). The "natural," for Genet, hence becomes another pose, another act, another style of performance.

ACTING LIKE A MAN: MASCULINITY AS PERFORMATIVE

It is important to recognise, at this point, that while Genet might represent the "natural" dominance of machismo as (re)produced in and by theatres of masculinity, *its effects are nonetheless real*. Macho may be enacted, but the assumption of this act is not voluntary; rather, it is both compelled and constrained by the spaces in which it is performed. This is vividly seen in Genet's description of the rigidly hierarchical Mettray reform school in *Miracle of the Rose*, in which boys not identified as a tough are seen as a "chicken" or "jerk" and subject to beatings and rapes. "Come what may," Genet warns himself, "I had to conceal my profound weakness, because all the same you sometimes have to 'put up a front' and Tight it out" (Genet 1971, 120). Much of the narrative of *Miracle of the Rose* recounts the complex process by which Genet protects himself from Mettray's "big shots" by transforming himself into a "he-man" (1971, 29). Significantly, Genet

suggests that what is necessary for this is both the unleashing of a "natural" toughness, as well as the mastery of the gestures and mannerisms of a tough. Thus while Genet argues "I was myself when I became a crasher" (1971, 26), he repeatedly states that his becoming-tough is produced by his successful *dissimulation* of toughness. Challenged by another boy, Genet consciously makes manifest the signs of an aggressive and pugnacious masculinity in a way that calls that masculinity into being:

I laughed, but my laughter was a little too shrill. I realised it, so did the others, they were all watching me. I lost my bearings, lost face. I grew more and more irritated. My heart beat very quickly and very loud. I felt hot and cold at the same time. Finally I began to tremble and I was even afraid my trembling might be visible to the pimps. They saw it. My agitation increased. I was no longer in possession of myself.... I suddenly realised I had to use this agitation, to make it look as if it were due to anger. With a slight shift, all the signs of my confusion could become signs of a magnificent anger. I had only to transpose.... Before long, I fell into the habit, when stepping back and bending over, of posing my hands on my thighs or bent knees, in the posture of a man about to dash forward, a posture whose virtue I felt as soon as I assumed it. I had the necessary vigour and my face became surly. My posture was no longer due to the jitters but was a tactical manoeuvre—All these gestures soon became natural, and it was owing to them that I was peaceably admitted ... to the society of the toughs (1971, 118-19; added ellipses).

Encircled by an audience of watchful, watching toughs, Genet's enactment of machismo is both compelled and necessarily conventional: it must be recognised (and valorised) by the other boys. Thus it is through his adoption of a stereotyped pose - crouched and ready to spring forward - that his "necessary vigour" is catalysed into a real, effective toughness. At first, his performance is cumbrous and flawed - "I overdid my virile posturing" he acknowledges (1971, 118); his mastery of the role of a tough comes only with his realisation that he must transform the *signs* of his fear into the *signs* of a manly anger. Genet's vigour and force are hence released only when he steps into a role. Any "natural" or "essential" toughness behind this display must be transformed by the right gesture into an effective, recognisable force: "I strode jauntily in my strength, with a weightiness, a sureness, a forthright look *which are themselves proof of force*" (1971, 25; added emphasis). The power of masculinity, which allows Genet to be peaceably admitted to the society of toughs, is hence represented as a product of its own performance: it is only when Genet has perfected the conventional pose of a tough that his toughness "becomes natural."

Many of Genet's macho characters similarly come to destabilise the traditional opposition between the natural and conventional. "Although Stilitano was really a gangster," Genet writes in *The Thief's Journal*, "he played at being one, that is, he invented gangster attitudes" (1964, 124). In a similar way, the militia in *Funeral Rites* are said to steal their bravura from "genuine cops" (1990b, 151) and the Mettray reform school boys to lie about their crimes: "Everyone relates fake adventures in which he plays the role of hero," Genet notes (1971, 43). The extent to which "natural" masculinity is represented as a style of performance in Genet's novels is seen most clearly in *Querelle of Brest*, in which Querelle's attempt to embody a "male type" transforms his "natural"

virility into a curiously decorative machismo. Querelle's muscles, Genet writes, are "his most ravishing ornaments" (1990c, 13), which he exaggerates until he becomes the fulfilment of a role: "He began to flex his knee joints till he could feel the touch of his trouser-legs against them, and very soon he was striding out like a sailor whose one desire is to personify the typical matelot" (1990c, 32). The self-scrutinising attention Querelle pays to his every gesture and movement ends by collapsing the traditional distinction between macho and drag, natural and theatrical, virility and dandyism, through which Querelle's characterisation might be read. Macho becomes, like drag, a self-conscious and highly stylised enactment of a conventional gender position. "Querelle loved extravagance," Genet writes:

Querelle grew up in a ... world of carefully studied attitudes—Typical were his tricks of ostentatiously displaying the roll of his shoulders, of keeping his hands thrust deep in his pockets, of swinging the turn-ups of his too-tight trousers from side to side . . . holding his arms well away from his body to make it look as if this was due to over-developed biceps and dorsal muscles. . . . The quest for a characteristic attitude to define Querelle once and for all... brings into sharp relief a form of terrifying dandyism (1990c, 35).

All of Querelle's "carefully studied" gestures are designed to exaggerate and enhance his masculinity: the fists thrust into the too-tight trousers and the extended arms become, precisely, a macho equivalent of dandyism, an aestheticised rendering of a pre-conceived notion of virility. Yet the conventionality of Querelle's performance of masculinity does not detract from its effectiveness, but on the contrary reinforces it: it is when Querelle assumes the manner of a "typical matelot" that he gains the power and authority the figure of the matelot represents. In Genet's work, men's power is often drawn from - is even dependent on - the circulation of archetypal images and roles: the play *The Balcony* is set in a brothel whose clients fantasise about being (and dress up as) various town notaries, while the "real" police chief believes his authority will only be confirmed once someone has impersonated him (1989a).

The authority of Genet's macho characters is hence (re)produced by the enactment of that authority, and it is in this sense that Genet's work resonates closely with recent critical theory of gender as performative. Theories of performativity focus, precisely, on the significance of each performance itself rather than the source - natural or constructed - of that performance. This area of research has been popularised by the work of Judith Butler, who famously argues, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, against the traditional assumption that the acts of gender are representations of an essential gender core:

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, *are performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express *are fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (Butler 1990, 136; original emphasis).

For this reason, Butler continues, "the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (1990, 140). What Butler means by this is that it is the apparent manifestations of gender that produce the idea of an originating, prior gender from which these apparently emanate. It is important not to misunderstand the implications of this argument, however. Butler's point is not that gender can be voluntarily assumed or changed at will, put on or thrown off like a theatrical costume, but rather that the compulsion to assume a gender role is performed by and on the body in a way that challenges the traditional assumptions about the "naturalness" or priority of particular gender roles and positions. For this reason, Butler argues, performativity problematises the distinction between natural and imitative gender she sees as regulating and perpetuating an obligatory heterosexuality by suggesting that all gender is equally performative (1990, 136).

The implications of this are further elucidated by Derrida's critique of mimesis, to which Butler's work is - although not uncritically - indebted. Derrida argues that the very concept of imitation seems to logically require the existence of a prior term as the source of that imitation. Through an examination of Mallarmé's work on mime, Derrida questions whether it is possible to displace this understanding of mimesis as a secondary phenomenon; whether it is possible to think of representation without invoking the idea of a present term, the Thing itself, from which it is seen to originate. He considers this through the figure of the mime artist who, he argues, reveals the extent to which an apparently present term is itself always-already a re-presentation. The conventional gestures of the mime artist's performance refer not to a prior thing or event, Derrida states, but only to other performances, representations reflecting each other like a pair of facing mirrors. "The mime produces... the very meaning of what he is presently writing: of what *he performs*," Derrida writes:

We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double. There is no simple reference. It is in this that the mime's operation does allude, but alludes to nothing, alludes without breaking the mirror, without reaching beyond the looking-glass (1981, 206; original emphasis).

The mime artist, for Derrida, is one who performs the impossibility of reaching beyond the "looking glass" of representations to the present term itself, who reveals the extent to which imitation refers not to an origin or source of imitations but only, self-reflexively, to the system in which it circulates. The act of mime thus makes visible the mechanics of its own performance, invoking an origin its own performance calls into being: "The Mime mimes reference. He is not an imitator; he mimes imitation" (1981, 219). By defining mimesis, as Butler defines gender performativity, in relation to a system of imitation rather than a prior or present term, Derrida recasts the question of whether some representations are more "natural" or "authentic" than others, by suggesting that the "natural" is - as Genet repeatedly argues - simply a particular style or convention of representation.³

"GAY" MACHO AND THE NATURE OF MASCULINITY

I want now to return to the question of what Genet's representation of macho as performative reveals about his representation of masculinity as a whole, and about the relationship between heterosexual and homosexual masculinity in particular. As we have already seen, the debate about Genet's work in gay literary criticism centres about a single concern: whether his homoeroticisation of macho masculinity subverts or confirms the "natural" dominance of heterosexual masculinity. What I want to consider now, then, is the extent to which Genet's representations of macho masculinity as a stylised theatrical space actually displace the terms of this debate, by problematising the distinction between a "natural" and an imitative (or failed) masculinity on which heterocentric assumptions about masculinity are based. The question is thus whether Genet's representation of macho as performative has repercussions for the whole sphere of masculinities represented in his novels, or rather constitutes itself as a specifically "gay" macho.

Genet's description of the "virilification" of Divine in *Our Lady of the Flowers* is a case in point. Divine's performance of a macho masculinity is portrayed as flawed and unconvincing in a way that might seem to perpetuate the heterocentric construction of gay men as only able to impersonate a masculinity in which they are "naturally" deficient. Having transformed himself from the village schoolboy Lou Culafoy into the Parisian transvestite Divine, Genet writes, Divine then attempts to metamorphose herself into a virile tough in order to seduce Our Lady:

[Divine] thought she had been virilified. A wild hope made her strong and husky and vigorous. She felt muscles growing, and felt herself emerging from a rock carved by Michelangelo— She tried for male gestures, which are rarely the gestures of males. She whistled, put her hands into her pockets, and this whole performance was carried out so unskilfully that in the course of a single evening she appeared to be four or five characters at the same time. She thereby acquired the richness of a multiple personality. ... She would begin her Big Scatterbrain gestures, then, suddenly remembering that she was supposed to show that she was virile so as to captivate the murderer, she would end by burlesquing them, and this double formula enveloped her in strangeness (Genet 1990a, 107-08).

By using the feminine pronoun throughout, and by stressing Divine's unfamiliarity with male gestures, Genet's own writing here undermines the success of Divine's "virilification." It is only with a "wild hope" that Divine can attempt virility: her Big Scatterbrain gestures remain more "natural," or at least more entrenched, in a way that renders her performance of masculinity a strange burlesque. However, while Divine's flawed performance of masculinity might be read as proof "she" is not properly, or "naturally," masculine, Genet describes Divine's gender as a "*double formula*" and proceeds to represent her femininity as equally unconvincing. The wig and makeup she wears as a transvestite doesn't enhance an essential womanliness, Genet stresses, but only exposes its own artificiality: "Powder and cream did not quite conceal the juncture with the skin of the forehead," he writes. "One might have thought that her head was artificial" (1990a, 124). Divine's gender remains the external manifestation of an inter-

nal indeterminacy; whatever is "beyond" these levels of performance, or at their centre, is not a single or essential identity but an irreducible multiplicity - "the richness of a multiple personality." Divine produces a series of temporal identities that exist in and through their own enactment, but s/he is not reducible to those performances. Indeed, over the course of the narrative, Divine undergoes so many, and such frequent, shifts in gender position that it is progressively more difficult to extrapolate a coherent gender identity from his/her various acts.

Even where Genet's works most appear to reinforce conventional ideas about the relationship between heterosexual and homosexual masculinity, then, they simultaneously undermine the distinction between a natural (or original) and assumed (or secondary) masculinity in which these ideas are based. For Genet, both macho and heterosexuality are styles of performance, social roles that circulate independent of the orientation of their performer. There is thus no inherent difference between a "gay" and "heterosexual" macho in Genet's novels. Instead, they make visible - or imitate - the heterocentric assumption there is a "gay" macho, discernibly different from and separate to a heterosexual one, and for which homosexuality is a secondary or supplementary form of masculinity. When Andy Metcalf and Martin Humphries try to define gay macho in their "Gay Machismo" and end up producing a catalogue of familiar types - "construction workers, truckers, men in overalls who could be plumbers or electricians, men in bikers' leather, cowboy denims or soldiers' fatigues" (Metcalf and Humphries 1985, 70) - this is, precisely, because macho is not an essence to be defined but a register of images, a repertoire of types and roles. Blachford, too, can only define gay macho as the "copying of traditional masculine clothing and its associated artefacts," which include: "metal-toed boots, studded belts, handcuffs and chains," along with "overalls, hard boots, construction helmet" and "plaid shirt, cowboy boots, short neck scarves" (1981, 192). Genet's work, on the other hand, disrupts heterocentrism most successfully where it questions this chronology, which positions "gay" macho as the copy of a prior (presumably heterosexual) one. It does this by elucidating the extent to which all macho is a flamboyant exaggeration of those characteristics of masculinity traditionally assumed to be "natural." Given that critics of the hypermasculinity of the Hollywood action hero have exhaustively demonstrated that even the most mainstream representations of dominant masculinity include ironic exaggerations of its machismo,⁴ we might question how these differ essentially from the inflated imitations characterised as a specifically "gay" macho. The performative quality of macho is not unique to a "gay" macho, as Genet's novels show. For Genet, all macho spectacularises masculinity, extravagantly enacting something that traditionally represents itself as natural and authentic. Genet's novels hence de-naturalise the heterocentric assumption that "gay" macho is a copy or corruption of a prior heterosexual macho not by opposing it but rather by revealing the extent to which all masculinities are equally performative.

CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF PERFORMATIVITY

In this way, Genet's representations of macho can be seen to problematise the chronology on which heterocentric assumptions about masculinity are based, and for which gay macho is an imitation of a prior heterosexual macho. Yet there are limits to what this representation can do, and Genet himself recognises this in his posthumous book *Prisoner of Love*, which recounts (in part) his time with the Afro-American protest movement, the Black Panthers: "the Panthers would do their best to terrorise the masters by the only means available to them. Spectacle," he writes. "But spectacle is only spectacle, and it may lead to mere figment, to no more than a colourful carnival; and that is a risk the Panthers ran. Did they have any choice?" (85). We might well ask the same question of Genet's work: did he have any choice but to make visible the conventions of a masculinity that traditionally represents itself as natural? In *Pompes funebres*, he reflects: "to write is to choose among the materials that are offered you" (8), and Genet's representations of dominant masculinity, similarly, can only be composed from the materials and strategies at hand. And yet these cannot be easily reconciled with heterocentric assumptions about that masculinity - not least because they reveal how ambiguous and incoherent the category of dominant masculinity actually is. Instead, Genet's characters inhabit the space of dominant masculinity in a way that de-naturalises traditional assumptions about the "essence" of that masculinity. Genet's representations of macho thus disturb the logic on which heterocentric assumptions about masculinity are based, not by opposing but, more subtly, by imitating and enacting them.

NOTES

- ¹ Sartre's *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* not only recognises but also reinforces this aspect of Genet's work, asserting: "the ecstasy of the passive homosexual is a torture" (1963, 109).
- ² See also Leo Bersani's *Homos* (1995, 45-52).
- ³ Irigaray connects the idea of mime to that of gender performance in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, in which she proposes that while women may be impelled to assume a conventionally feminine role, their mimicry can enact and de-naturalise that femininity in a subversive way: "If she can play [her] role so well, if it does not kill her, quite, it is because she keeps something in reserve with respect to this function. Because she still subsists, otherwise and elsewhere than there where she mimes so well what is asked of her. Because her own 'self remains foreign to the whole staging" (152).
- ⁴ See, for instance, Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, Fred Pfeil's "From Pillar to Postmodernism: Race, Class, and Gender in the Male Rampage Film," in *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference*; Steve Neale's "Masculinity as Spectacle," in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*.

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