

## AUDIO ESSAY

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# Gendering technology: *in* and *out* of the box A theory-informed reading of the iPod

### ABSTRACT

*The main idea I develop in this piece is how the hypermodern 'text' of the iPod may be used to read the simultaneous multiplicity of gendered identities. I mostly rely on Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity to inform my literary points. Having in mind Butler's theoretical approach to gender and identity, I have long thought about how easily the iPod lends itself to being queered. In addition, after writing the text to this piece, I remixed it with the music of two U.S.-based indie artists, the musical group Calico as well as Camille Nelson's newly released album First Words.*

### KEYWORDS

iPod  
Literary Theory  
Fluid Identity  
Music Technology

Gadgets have a way of making me happy. Switching to the iPod was the next natural step. The other gadgets were oh-so-twentieth century. That little gadget, my chosen box of possibilities, the iPod. Having in mind the theoretical approach of Judith Butler on gender I have long thought about how easily the

- 1 Shakespeare, William (2004), *Twelfth Night*. Act 1, scene 1, 1–3, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- 2 The music comes from the track entitled 'Bloodflow' from Calico's album *Black Pyramid*.
- 3 Butler, Judith (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge.
- 4 The music comes from the track entitled 'Red Letter Dat' from Camille Nelson's studio album *First Word*.
- 5 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mina\\_\(singer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mina_(singer))
- 6 Music references included in the audio mix: Calico's *Black Pyramid* and Camille Nelson's *First Words*.
- 7 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Killers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Killers)
- 8 The music featured in this section of the text comes from Calico's track 'Bloodflow'.
- 9 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muse\\_\(band\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muse_(band))
- 10 <http://new.music.yahoo.com/mandalay/>
- 11 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belle\\_&\\_\\_Sebastian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belle_&__Sebastian)
- 12 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Magnetic\\_Fields](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Magnetic_Fields)
- 13 The music featured in this section comes from Camille Nelson's track 'What You're Doing to Me'.
- 14 Butler, Judith (1993), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York: Routledge.
- 15 Extracts from *Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler*. Interview by Peter Osborne and

iPod lends itself to being queered. Music precedes partners, relationships, most thoughts and sensations, even good writing. To me, at least.

'If music be the food of love, play on. Give me excess of it',<sup>1</sup> says Count Orsino in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. And I concur. Entirely.<sup>2</sup> One could never overdose on music, after all. I'd venture so much as to say that I'm not capable of producing good work sans music.

Fluidity of existence is rendered possible via music. Judith Butler maintains a number of identities are occupied by the same person thanks to the many different roles that same individual can play in society.<sup>3</sup> And these roles, I would add, can only be played if music were in the background.<sup>4</sup> One is not just an athlete, a music lover, a mentor, a tutor, a child, a partner, a parent, and so forth. One is all of these things. And one does not just listen to Mozart, Led Zeppelin, The Beatles, Mina,<sup>5</sup> Puccini, Wagner, The Stones, and so forth, but to a cornucopia of things. This need for diversity in music selections seems to match an inherent human need to diversify identity-wise.<sup>6</sup>

Again, the fragment and the whole go hand in hand. One single role is as important as the sum of all the roles we play our entire lives. Mozart's 'Requiem' comes to me with as much exuberance as The Killers'<sup>7</sup> 'Indie Rock 'n Roll'. Even the most beautifully executed Rachmaninoff piece after being played non-stop all one's life can lose some of its grandeur, if not in the company of some other pieces, let's say decadent rock<sup>8</sup> and even some Schönberg and Stravinsky in the mix.

'Your music collection is just so queer.' See? It's not the individual performers the friend was referring to. That elusive 'queer' did not just refer to Madonna, Muse,<sup>9</sup> Mandalay,<sup>10</sup> Belle & Sebastian,<sup>11</sup> or The Magnetic Fields.<sup>12</sup> He found the collective to be queer. So much variety in one little box! The white box oozes queerness.<sup>13</sup>

In her *Bodies That Matter*,<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler observes that crafting any positions or what she refers to as 'reciting a given position in society always involves becoming haunted by what's excluded and the more rigid the position the greater the ghost and the more threatening [it] is in some way'.<sup>15</sup> I experience such haunting by what was excluded on the 15th of June 2005. That day, my life as I knew it, changed radically.

I was riding my Honda Metro<sup>16</sup> scooter listening to The Killers' singing 'Indie Rock 'n Roll' and I remember noting that moment in time as a happy one. A thought I had at that point is how a little thing like a rock song could capture my attention so much that I'd be oblivious to anything else of importance.

Goethe once noted that great things should never be at the mercy of things that mattered least.<sup>17</sup> In that moment, it was all about rock. Unfortunately, that moment, like so many moments in time, was painfully finite.<sup>18</sup> When my iPod fell on the ground, I felt a disconnect. It was suddenly lying on the hot asphalt of 13th East in Salt Lake City. A tourist bus containing a plethora of people crushed it and my heart sank. My music was gone. It was taken from me. I felt wounded. I retrieve the iPod when it's safe to do so and it's defunct. No life in it. No music coming out of it. 'This is just great!'

A few days go by. I get another iPod. It seems so strange to me. It's a 60 GB!<sup>19</sup> I look at it as if it were an original Monet or the wet lips of a good kisser. It's so beautiful to me, it's hurting my eyes. It's so pristine, so white, so virginal. And it's all mine. I like white things. They beg for attention. They appear so delicate, and yes, pretty. One little white thing, the all-present iPod. I have to spend more time on it. It's like meeting someone new and sensing the pool of

possibility they exude and then wondering if you'll have enough time to really get to know them. I do. I take the time.

I create the iPod for me. The right partner that will accompany me daily as I go jogging, biking, hiking, shopping, flying to places, thinking. I have spent more time with the iPod than with close friends, partners, colleagues, and acquaintances. I choose five different protective skins for it.

When I'm feeling jovial, my iPod looks orange to purposefully mismatch the rest of my colourful ensemble of multicoloured socks and shirts. Ah, the things one does in the name of postmodernity! The iPod adds to the queerness of the external presentation. It is dressed in black when I don't want it to clash with my more serious outfits. Then, there's the blue cover for working out at the gym, the pink to confuse my girlfriends and, of course, the white, my choice lack of colour.

The white iPod is like a *tabula rasa*. It signifies such a new beginning, such a sense of possibilities. I think about what it means to pull off white. That colour almost compels the user to match the pristine nature of the box itself. Being known for losing things compulsively,<sup>20</sup> I am amazed at the fragile behaviour I espouse when I touch my white iPod. That colour demands gentleness, care, love.

A number of blissful months ensue till that sinister Saturday morning. That very Saturday I could finally point to a moment in time when an abstract feeling of loss was rendered concrete. It was concretely lying on my hand. The dead, white box. 'Come on, don't be so puerile! It's just an iPod. You'll get another.'

What a strange way to console someone. See, to me, the iPod is anthropomorphized. It is the one thing I allow to accompany me everywhere. The iPod is my journal. I look at my writing and most of the time I can unequivocally remember what music I implemented. E-mails to partners: mostly rock; e-mails to Dad: Verdi; editing: punk, only punk. My writing process is apparently accompanied by a nod of the head that imitates the sounds of the music I'm listening to. Naturally, it must be a gene-determined mannerism. If my iPod were to be taken from me now, I would be inconsolable.

The first thing I do to cope with a crisis at hand is turn on my iPod. Then I can breathe. It feels as comforting as a smoker's first cigarette, or a starved person's first bite of a delectable dish. The iPod caters to my very basic instincts; it feeds me. Then, there are the streets, those of London, Seattle, Portland, Detroit and Salt Lake. They all seem to be full of white earphone carriers; a world of people who choose to focus on what is being poured into their brains by way of the iPod.

Some say we are becoming more and more marginalized and detached from the world. I would say the iPod is forcing many of us to look inside a bit more, perhaps at the risk of being hit by a bus, being distracted so much that a connection is missed at the airport in a foreign land. Be that as it may, the little box demands attention and pure love. It always delivers. At least until it's attacked by a mean vehicle which suffocates its voice. The iPod. It represents a universe of possibilities. Where I seem to go, it goes there as well.

The absence of music is the presence of impotence.<sup>21</sup> While a popular literary concept would stipulate that absence is as important as the presence of a subject, I would say that the absence of music would equal the absence of written work. As some readers of Nietzsche<sup>22</sup> would concur, music is the ultimate form of expression, and hence it precedes all. But back to the iPod.

My whole music library in one little gadget. I remember thinking of the cumbersome nature of the red CD player. The little CD player only played a CD

Lynne Segal, London, 1993.  
(<http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm>)

16 <http://powersports.honda.com/2009/metropolitan.aspx>

17 [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Johann\\_Wolfgang\\_von\\_Goethe](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Johann_Wolfgang_von_Goethe)

18 The music featured here comes from Calico's track 'Heaven'.

19 <http://support.apple.com/kb/SP41>

20 The music featured here comes from Calico's track 'Bloodflow'.

21 Another snippet from Calico's track 'Heaven' serves as soundtrack in this paragraph.

22 With this reference I have in mind Nietzsche's music-loving, dying Socrates in the former's work *Die Geburt der Tragödie*; Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1993), *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, London: Penguin Books Ltd.

- 23 The idea of fragmentation here is informed by Schlegel's discussion of fragmentation. See Ginette Verstraete (1998), *Fragments of the Feminine Sublime in Friedrich Schlegel and James Joyce*, New York: CUNY Press.
- 24 The music featured at the end of the piece comes from Camille Nelson's track 'What You're Doing to Me' found in the album *First Words*.

at a time.<sup>23</sup> Making the transition to the iPod came as naturally to me as most of Europe switching from feudalism to capitalism. Perhaps comparing my switch from a CD player to the iPod to a major shift in the political and economic system is too much of a stretch but I do so purposefully. Having a gadget like the iPod is a necessity in this time frame. Few other things manage to therapize me as effectively and very few things manage to keep my attention longer than a few hours.

So much information coming out of that white, pristine box. The consciousness of this twenty-first century being is fed by the best designed box of them all, the iPod. The fluid iPod can be a number of colours: it can shift identities as readily as a twenty-first century punk rock-loving, serious-looking, farming-interested academic. It is here and it is queer. And after many deliberations with many a person, the best I can do to explain the term 'queer' is that it is ubiquitous. Yes, everywhere. It cannot help but be everywhere. It graces the streets of Salt Lake, Chicago, Rome, London, Toronto, the world.

There where we are, there it is also.<sup>24</sup>

### Audio versions of the essay:

#### As MP3

[http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/ribaj1/audio/Ribaj\\_Gendering\\_Technology\\_Music1.mp3](http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/ribaj1/audio/Ribaj_Gendering_Technology_Music1.mp3)

#### As Wav

[http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/ribaj1/audio/Ribaj\\_Gendering\\_Technology\\_Music1.wav](http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/ribaj1/audio/Ribaj_Gendering_Technology_Music1.wav)

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Brikena Ribaj is currently a faculty member at The Ohio State University's Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures. While she is trained as a medievalist and Germanist, she also contributes work in the realm of literary theory and pop culture interpretations. Most recently, she has published original research on a gender theory-informed analysis of a German medieval verse narrative entitled *der borte*. The article, which was published by the journal *Neophilologus* (vol. 93, no. 4, October 2009), is entitled *Economics of Virtue in Dietrich von der Glezze's der borte: A Wife Errant and a Husband Caught*. She also has two iTunes-supported podcast series: 'Gendering the Media with Brikena Ribaj' and a medieval literature series called 'De Amore: On Love with Brikena Ribaj'.

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