

## DENNIS COOPER'S *THE SLUTS*: PROSTHETIC AND PERFORMATIVE (HOMO) SEXUALITY

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### *Abstract*

Dennis Cooper's homosexual-inflected work seems, paradoxically enough, to resist queer conceptualizations. It has triggered, instead, readings from ethos as disparate as the avant-garde French literary tradition or the discourse of superficiality of youth cultures. And yet, the 2005 novel *The Sluts* seems to imply a turning point in Cooper's relationship with the queer imaginary. This study will argue that access to the onto-epistemological core of the novel can just take place by taking into account two of the most important foundations of Queer Theory: the prosthetization and the performativization of eroticism. Drawing on Haraway and Preciado, prosthetization in *The Sluts* will reveal itself as a metaphorizing drive which will take the understanding of sexuality beyond the hackneyed essentialism/constructivism debate. In turn, sexual performativity, either Foucauldian or Butlerian, will allow Cooper to eviscerate sexuality as desire in the making whose ultimate goal is to affect and to be affected by bordering monads.

*Keywords:* USA Transgressive literature, sexual prostheses, sexual performativity, Dennis Cooper's *The Sluts*, Queer Theory.

### *Resumen*

La obra de Dennis Cooper, a pesar de estar llena de tramas homosexuales, parece, parad jicamente, evitar conceptualizaciones *queer*. Se ha explorado, sin embargo, desde paradigmas tan dispares como la literatura vanguardista francesa o el discurso de las revoluciones juveniles. Su novela de 2005 *Chaperos* parece marcar un punto de inflexi n en la relaci n de Cooper con el imaginario *queer*. Este estudio arguir  que el acceso al n cleo onto-epistemol gico de la novela solo se puede acometer desde dos de los pilares fundamentales de la Teor a *Queer*: la prostetizaci n y la performativizaci n del erotismo. Utilizando principios de Preciado y Haraway, la prostetizaci n en *Chaperos* se revela como un mecanismo al servicio de la metaforicidad dirigido a la desarticulaci n del manido debate esencialismo-constructivismo en el entendimiento de la sexualidad. Por su parte, la performatividad sexual, ya sea foucauldiana o butleriana, le permitir  a Cooper revelar la sexualidad como deseo en proceso de autoconstrucci n cuya meta  ltima es afectar y dejarse afectar por las m nadas colindantes.

*Palabras clave:* Literatura transgresora estadounidense, pr tesis sexuales, performatividad sexual, *Chaperos* de Dennis Cooper, Teor a *Queer*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although his work almost exclusively deals with homosexual men, Cooper's relationship with gay studies has never been a smooth one. His absence from this field is more than understandable. In light of the dignity that gay studies aim to bring to the “gay cause”, Cooper's murderous plots, which present an extremely perverse image of his homosexual heroes, are anything but acceptable. That his is not palatable gay literature is something that the author himself clearly asserts when he situates his position within the world of homosexual art and literature as “a thorn in its side” or “as part of a growing anti-assimilationist Queer movement” (Nicolini 1993).

The thrust of Cooper's literary ethos is influenced by other purposes. He makes this clear when, in an interview, he states: “I am not into collective identity at all. It just doesn't interest me at all. I mean, I think I have the same relationship to homosexuality as any kind of transgressive artist that is a heterosexual has to heterosexuality [...] I feel alienated from it”. Cooper rejects the need for a politicized community to protect one's sexual freedom. Rather, he highlights that “you need freedom from the political community to protect your individual and ever-coveted perversions of mind and body” (Nicolini 1993). The George Miles Cycle, which comprises Cooper's first five novels—*Closer* (1989), *Frisk* (1991), *Try* (1994), *Guide* (1997), and *Period* (2000), clearly demonstrates this. It proffers a literary imaginary in which “the emphasis on transgression, the seeming aimlessness of the characters, and the flat, reflective surface of the writing combine to insulate the fiction from external concerns” (Annesley 2006:69). Cooper's work seems to be completely disconnected from the mundane, forging, therefore, a quasi-hallucinatory universe in which the main characters are extremely thin, drug-addicted youngsters, who are normally prey to psychopaths, a kind of illuminati who firmly believe, along with Cooper, that “knowledge is to be found at the edge of experience and that the body is the site for gaining knowledge” (Soukhanov 1996).

Perhaps following Cooper's own antipathy towards the gay cause, his critical commentators rarely read his literature through a homosexual prism. Instead, Cooper's aesthetic and onto-epistemological uniqueness tends to be analyzed along three main critical paths: the philosophically-inflected avant-garde French literary tradition of perverse desire and evil from de Sade to Genet (Lev 2006:200-24), the nihilism and chaos to which our conflicting postmodern times would confine the subject (Jackson 2006:83-93; Kennedy 2008:68-82; Viegner, 2008:136), and the discourse of superficiality of youth cultures—whether punk, post-punk, or blank generation preppy styles (Young 1992:1-20). If Cooper's non-denominationalism and lack of interest in political lobbies has kept him well off the spectrum of gay

studies, something similar has happened with Queer Theory. In the George Miles Cycle, there is no dissent, denunciation or artistic slogans. Cooper, as part of the Blank Generation, simply assumes “the dizzying excesses of consumer society [...]: inner city decay, extravagant commodity fetishism, sexual and narcotic extremes, information overloads, AIDS, and always ‘the pressure, the pressure’” (Young 2006:64). There is no insistence upon anything, just nothingness and a disquieting superficiality bordering on paranoia: “Dennis Cooper is reciting Aeschylus with a mouthful of bubble-gum” (Edmund White cited in Wortman (2001)) or “George Bataille stranded in Disneyland” (Elizabeth Young cited in Wortman (2001)).

This disaffection to Queer Theory brought about by Cooper himself and most of his critical commentators was to come to an end in 2005 when *The Sluts* was first published. Consciously or unconsciously—that is of no importance at all—, this study will argue that in the novel Cooper engages with two of the most important foundations of the queer creed: the prosthetization and the performativization of eroticism. Access to the onto-epistemological core of *The Sluts* can just be granted through the two above-mentioned passages. It seems that Cooper finally goes queer.

## 2. PROSTHETIZATION OF DESIRE IN *THE SLUTS*: THE INDISTINCTION BETWEEN NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY

Adored, opened-up, abused, torn apart, reluctant, inviting, raped, or even dead..., no matter the form, the focus is always on the flesh. Male bodily matter, while involved in homosexual intercourse, is all-pervasive in *The Sluts*. It is always there, always ready to asphyxiate the reader with its thickness:

He has the hottest, sweetest little ass, especially if you like them a little used like I do. I must have eaten out his hole for an hour. I got four fingers inside him. I couldn't fuck him hard and deep enough. I spanked him, and not softly either. I pinched and twisted the hell out of his nipples. Nothing fazed him. All the time his cute boy face looked at me with his mouth wide open and made these sounds like he was scared to death and turned on at the same time. I came twice, first in his mouth and then up his ass. (2005:3)

In light of such delirious displays of carnality, would anyone now be surprised when told *The Sluts* explores many themes except the most apparent, the display of human flesh? It is precisely my contention that the novel is about the opposite: the excarnation of sexual bodies whose flesh is ultimately replaced with a virtual prosthesis. *The Sluts* chronicles Brad's trade. He is a gay hustler whose experiences are narrated by his clients in electronic reviews and board posts on an

escort agency website, and through voicemail messages on a chat-line for “rent-boys”. This multi-perspective purview, together with incursions in the narrative from the webmaster and the hustler himself, create a convoluted narrative. The content of these various accounts is anything but nice; depending on the review, Brad’s body may be abused, raped, or even murdered. Although *The Sluts* reveals itself as a collection of extremely physical sexual adventures, such excessive carnal displays prove to be a lie. At the end of the novel the reader learns that the narrator is unreliable: all the reviews on Brad, all the savage sadomasochistic prescription inscribed on his delicate body, and all the erotic arousal or disgust the clients and the readers might experience have been mostly made up by a perverse client who is infatuated with the hustler:

Dear Webmaster,

I need to clear my conscience. I've been lying to you and to everyone who reads this website. I maintained the lie for as long as I could but I don't have it in me to keep going. I don't have the imagination to pull this off. I realized that today and made a decision to come clean to you because either way I lose.

The truth is that I started this in good faith. I went to great effort to get Brad for you and finish this thing off right. He wasn't Brad. He sure fooled me for a while, but I know how easy it is to bullshit someone when you know what he wants to hear. The first six reviews were real. After that, the Brad imposter fucked me over and left. I wrote the rest of the reviews except for the review of 'Thad' from the guy in Portland. (2005:260)

The blow is sudden and hard. After the confession, all the erotic flesh the reader had been submerged in, that of Brad's and the clients' who had used and abused him, is forever gone. This is so, at least, in its traditional carnal dimension, given that, in *The Sluts*, the computer screen that captures the clients' reviews is the only truth left for sexual desire. It is not that erotic activity in the novel takes place through computer screens, it is that erotic activity is singularly played-out on the computer screen. Sexuality in Cooper's narrative is typed about, which can only lead to the formulation of one question: what are the characters, men or machines? Not even the latter option: heroes become a fictional flow that a computer screen has captured and that is their sole reality. A cybernetic lie has carved the flesh out the heroes and replaced it by computer flesh.

Why does Cooper turn eroticism into a prosthetic substitute? Why does Cooper deprive Brad of his natural carnal thickness? Is it to put into practice an ethics of attention? That is, might Cooper be manipulating the readers' expectations to prevent them from tuning in with his murderous plots as some kind of attention ironic device? (Aaron 2004:115-18; Young 2008:48-49). However feasible, this perspective does not exhaust further critical outlooks on the function of prosthetization in particular, or eroticism in general, in *The Sluts*. One key to other interpretations of the novel might lie in its deceptive ending. Sex, bodies, and desire,

ultimately, prove to be a lie, an illusion. But what is the goal of this illusion? To mislead the readers, or to let them explore those areas of their sexual desire they are not prone to explore due to received prejudice? Both avenues are, of course, worth considering. Baudrillard's views on contemporary existence offer an adequate platform to conceptualize the former exegetical path. In *The Vital Illusion* (2000) he apocalyptically claims that virtuality leads to the prosthetization of our lives, including sexual desire, which stands out as the most contemporary form of evil. For the French thinker, virtual reality is the end of humanism:

What is there beyond the end? Beyond the end extends virtual reality, the horizon of a programmed reality in which all our known functions—memory, emotions, sexuality, intelligence—become progressively useless. Beyond the end, in the era of the transpolitical, the trans-sexual, the transaesthetic, all our desiring machines become little spectacle machines, then quite simply bachelor machines, before dying away into the countdown of the species. (2000:33)

The virtual reality which *The Sluts* orchestrates, which correlates with Baudrillard's view, might well be destroying time because it freezes reality in a feigned exactitude that will never do justice to reality. Virtuality, to daringly apply Baudrillard's words to Cooper's novel, captures the hustler and his clients in a deadlock of collective neurosis, "entrapped between our [their] fossils and our [their] clones", "prefiguring the great migration from the void into the periphery" (2000:34-35). Trapped in the middle of this periphery, is there anything that human beings can do? Baudrillard is sententious in this respect: "It is useless to dream of revolution through content, useless to dream of a revelation through form, because the medium and the real are now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable" (1994:83). The only form of resistance available is to "conquer the world and seduce it through an indifference that is at least equal to the world's" (1988:101). Baudrillard, then, puts nihilism forward as the only escape from the trap into which contemporary existence seems to have fallen. But even nihilism has lost any possibility for radicality: "Death no longer has a stage, neither phantasmatic nor political, on which to represent itself, to play itself out, either a ceremonial or a violent one. And that is the victory of the other nihilism, of the other terrorism, that of the system" (1994:164).

Baudrillard's post-apocalyptic philosophy is, no doubt, open to further critical exploration within the realms of *The Sluts*. However, this is a task that should be undertaken in another article. Apart from constraints on space, I will justify this decision by demonstrating that in *The Sluts* not everything is darkness. Two aspects point to a more *poietic* luminous direction: the lie at the end of the novel, which is not only indicative of nihilism, but also open to bliss (this aspect will be addressed in the following section) and Cooper's deployment of discourse on cybernetic sexuality, which, once again, can be read from constructive perspectives, unlike in Baudrillard. My hypothesis regarding this latter aspect is that,

by excarnating the body of desire and, therefore, playing with the readers' expectations—something made possible because of the virtual framework that Cooper confers the novel—, the author is reflecting on how sexuality happens, which clearly connects him to the field of sexual identity-formation discourses, especially Queer Theory. For this paradigm, in contrast to Baudrillard, the prosthetization of sexual desire entails the possibility of understanding sex beyond the dyad essentialism/constructivism, something Cooper attempts in light of how he organizes the events in his novel. But before attending to them, it is necessary to give some sort of general background about the relationship between prostheses and Queer Theory.

The progressive intellectual empowerment of gender studies (be it in the form of feminism, gay and lesbian studies, or Queer Theory) that the second half of the 20th century brought about, gave way to questioning the way heteropatriarchy had manipulated the formation of sexual identities. The onto-epistemological opening that this challenge to traditional understandings of sexuality and gender enacted normally follows two main directions: essentialism and constructivism. The latter states that the categories “man” or “woman” are not natural. Rather, they are culturally constructed ideals, subject to diachronic and cultural change. Essentialists, in contrast, argue that sexual and gender specificities thrive on psychical and physical aspects which pre-exist cultural or historical difference. However useful these two stances may have been in the normalization of non-normative sexualities, they are not without their problems. From the late 20th century it has been made obvious that sexuality cannot be looked at from such a narrow perspective. Foucault's counter-discursive recoveries of subjugated knowledges (1984), Butler's performativity (1990), and Sedgwick's insights on heterosexuality revolving around homosexuality in its discursive production (1990)—to mention just three cornerstones of this field—have taken the understanding of eroticism beyond the essential/constructed pair.

Along this same line of thinking, in *Mafiniesto contrasexual* (2002) (*Counter-Sexual Manifesto*), Beatriz Preciado makes a relevant point for the present article. She highlights that the essentialism/constructivism conflict, viewed in relation to our understanding of sexuality, has completely disregarded one of the most important improvements that it brought about: the increasingly blurred line that divides nature and artifice. From the *Renaissance* to the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism it promoted, technology has been an integral part of the modern conception of man (Beaud 1983; Calinescu 1996; Parfitt 2002). After Nietzsche declared the death of God, technology became the mechanism through which illusions of utopia and progress were fed to the population. Technology, in this regard, became our deepest form of nature, another element of modernity's list of grand narratives. Nature and artifice, then, in today's modernity imaginary, become virtually indistinguishable.

One area, however, seems to have resisted this trend: sexuality. There are two main reasons underlying this assumption. On the one hand, we regard sexuality as one of the most authentic, natural things. On the other, we are aware of the history of oppression underlying the expression of gender and sexuality. Connections between these two ways of looking at sexuality were not easy to make and the definition of sexuality got entrenched in either essentialist or constructivist stances. This was so until Donna Haraway and her cyborgs came along. She deploys the metaphor of a cyborg to think of sexuality and gender beyond naturalism and essentialism. Her point is clear: “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (1991:150). The nature of the cyborg, half organism and half machine, creature of both fiction and lived social reality, allows her to show that nature and technology can mesh, above all, in the understanding of sexuality and gender. But these blurred limits are not exclusive to cyborgs. Some prostheses also render obsolete the binary opposition between natural and artificial sexualities. In this list, Beatriz Preciado includes dildos that enjoy themselves, people living with AIDS, hormones, transexual bodies, drugs, and virtual sex—an aspect at work in *The Sluts*, as will be discussed later (2002:135). The main point of cyborgs and prostheses is the reinvention of nature that they carry out (2002:135). They metaphorize the spectrum of sexuality, conceiving it as a creative substratum. Cyborgs, and, by extension prostheses, are, in Haraway's words, “text, machine, body, and metaphor—all of them theorized and integrated into practice as communication” (1991:212). Consequently, cyborgs and prostheses would add weight to Marshall McLuhan's visionary insight that the late 20th century would see the advent of posthumanity; that is, technological developments, far from just replacing an organ, would end up modifying it and even reconstituting it as “other” (1964:17).

The structure of sexuality in *The Sluts* follows the same pattern. In the narrative the computer screen acts as a prosthetic substitute for a natural function, in this case, for erotic bodies and their sexualities. Sexuality in the novel is a deceiving virtual web, a cyber-lie which, through a key-board, transforms alleged bodies into machines and vice-versa. So sexuality manifests itself as a text, a machine, and a body. But it is also more than that. It is creation, a metaphor—the last term in Haraway's list. We learn this towards the end of the novel when, after revealing everything is a lie, the narrator says: “I am a great liar, so I started writing fake reviews. I thought I could make up a better ending than whatever would have happened anyway” (2005:261). The computer allows the narrator to introduce fantasy, the fictive aspect, in the field of sexuality. It opens it up to “whatever”, to quote the text again, which, as he says, is completely different from what would have happened in reality. Sexuality for Cooper lies at the crossroads of fiction, artifice and nature. It reveals itself as a *techné* (the art of making), as a fabrication that seems extremely natural, or as nature which looks artificial. Why does Cooper orchestrate such an understanding of sexuality? *The Sluts* and the prosthetic model

of eroticism it puts forward, aims to promote a form of desire which is self-conscious about the ways in which fantasy constructs desire through the illusion of authenticity in fictive performance. Cooper's message is clear: any form of sexuality is a lie if it is conceived as a one-way unitary tale, and this is so simply because sexuality is not only a source of legitimate knowledge but also an uncontrollable energy prone to be expressed in myriad ways.

### 3. PERFORMATIVITY IN *THE SLUTS*: DISEMBODYING DESIRE

In order to really conceptualize the philosophical prospection of Cooper's view on sexuality in *The Sluts*, it is necessary to highlight another mechanism which will prove to be, at least, as defiant of conventional understandings of eroticism as prosthetization. As discussed in the previous section, Cooper orchestrates his novel as a multi-vocal symphony in which, through their reviews, clients and hustlers enter a circle of farcical accusations. Among all these voices, one is especially interesting since it determines the narrative both diegetically and onto-epistemologically. It belongs to the clients. The novel presents their opinions as screenshots of the computer screen on which they are reviewing the hustler. Such accounts, which amount to over two thirds of the book, always follow the same pattern. Cooper presents them as a chart in which, in a very formulaic and objective way, the clients provide information about the hustler whom they hired. The last element of the review reads "Experience" and in it some of the clients explain in detail the scabrous events of their date. Although the novel comprises 22 reviews, I reproduce below the first one by way of illustration:

#### Review#1

**Escort's name:** Brad

**Location:** Long Beach

**Age:** 18?

**Month and year of date:** June 2001

**Where did you find him?** Street

**Internet address:** no

**Escort's email address:** none

**Escort's advertised phone number:** not advertised, but try 310-837-6112

**Rates:** I gave him \$200

**Did he live up to his physical description?**

**Did he live up to what he promised?**

**Height:** 5'11?"



**Weight:** 150 lbs.?  
**Facial hair:** no  
**Body hair:** pubes only  
**Hair color:** blond (dyed)  
**Eye color:** hazel  
**Dick size:** 6 inches?  
**Cut or Uncut:** cut  
**Thickness:** couldn't tell  
**Does he smoke?** yes  
**Top, bottom, versatile:** bottom  
**In calls/out calls /not sure:** not sure  
**Kisser:** yes  
**Has he been reviewed before?** No  
**Rating:** recommended (see review)  
**Hire again:** no (see review)  
**Handle:** bigman60  
**Submission:** this is my seventh review  
**URL for pics:** no

**Experience:** There are usually a few street hustlers working the blocks around a local bar here in Long beach called Pumpers. That's where they like to hang out and play pool between tricks. It is a pretty sad scene, so I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw this beautiful, skinny kid with a back-pack who told me his name was Brad...

**You:** I'm a middle-aged, overweight top into teenaged street trade, the cuter and skinnier the better.

By using this cybernetic narrative model, I argue that Cooper challenges the idea upheld in metaphysical thinking (specifically in its patriarchal and heterosexist dimensions) that eroticism is a unitary and stable content. In keeping with postmodern outlooks on general identity such as Derrida's deconstruction (1978), Vattimo's weak thought (1992), and Lyotard's attack of grand narratives (1996), Cooper, in *The Sluts*, advocates for the necessity of conceiving erotic desire beyond the metaphysical matrix ("fixed", "centered", "truth"). In doing so, less programmatic aspects of sexuality arise, showing it also as creativity and metaphoricality. But how can sexuality—something we regard as natural—be presented as free play? That is to say, how can the "natural" and "essential" be detached from the category "sexual identity"? Michel Foucault and Judith Butler reveal themselves instrumental in this respect—the former through his genealogical exploration of the manipulation that often preys on sexuality, and the latter by highlighting the performative nature of both gender and sex (the sexed body).

The manipulated nature of discourses on sex was first put forward by Michel Foucault in his monumental *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*

(1978). There he demonstrates that the norms that govern the understanding and expression of eroticism are discursively produced by elites with a clear will to power. In the first volume of his work he argues that, in its production of sexuality, the modern ethos has always oscillated between silencing it—Victorian sexual prim, for instance—or speaking it out—let us think about psychoanalysis and its idea that if people are to lead mentally healthy lives, our forbidden innermost desires have to be talked about and not repressed. For Foucault, although clearly antagonistic, both approaches to sexuality nevertheless share a point in common: sexuality, no matter if repressed or liberated, is seen as a natural essential force. The French thinker challenges this idea by demonstrating that sex is not only a biological feature, but mostly thrives on historical, social, and cultural institutions and their narratives: it is, therefore, discursively produced. Foucault eviscerates this dimension of sexuality by examining in detail the emergence in early 18<sup>th</sup> century European societies of the category “population”: “population as wealth, population as manpower or labor capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded. Governments perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with a ‘people’, but with a ‘population’[...]” (1978:25).

The Industrial Revolution, Foucault argues, caused the social, cultural, political, and economic activities of people to be massively turned into discourse for the first time in Western history. Through written records and statistics—from birth or death rates to the calculation of life expectancy or surveys on most frequent illnesses—, people began to be administered, not as individuals, but as a collection of people with its specific necessities and peculiarities. Sex, of course, was also a concern for this trend. Through the institution of marriage, sex became a public issue where written records institutionalized how it should be lived:

It was necessary to analyze the birthrate, the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate births, the precocity and frequency of sexual relations, the ways of making them fertile or sterile, the effects of unmarried life or of the prohibitions, the impact of contraceptive practices—of those notorious “deadly secrets” which demographers on the eve of the Revolution knew were already familiar to the inhabitants of the countryside. (1978:26)

The discursivization that sex was subject to at that time resulted in some forms of eroticism being considered illegitimate or pathological, while others—those which fitted into the prescribed categories—were beginning to be produced as truths (1978:42). So, for Foucault, the preponderance of the heterosexual matrix over other sexual possibilities, even in contemporary times, responds solely to the fancies of the elites that generate the ruling discourse but never respond to nature or essence. That is, jurisprudence, religious grand narratives, medical, pedagogical, familial, even psychoanalytical discourses are as responsible (or even more so) for the way we live sexuality as our own instincts. Sexuality, then, is not about the understanding of our desires and to what extent our individual psyches are

responsible for our shameful or healthy erotic drives. Rather, it is about understanding how these desires have been shaped—liberated or repressed—by discourses and economies of power. In Foucault's system, sexuality, to a great extent, reveals itself as bodily practices sanctioned through a biased use of discourse. It has to do, then, with words and their traps. This is also the case in *The Sluts*. Is this not the conclusion to draw for how sex works in the novel? On being mounted upon a lie, sex cannot recourse to truth or essence. On the contrary, after finding they have been lied to, all that is left for the readers to assert regarding the function of sexuality in *The Sluts* is its fictive and deceptive nature. Sexuality is, thus, presented as a plot, as a discursive manipulation by one of the reviewers aimed at satisfying a necessity of his to which critical attention will be later paid. In sum, by stressing that words are prone to render a completely biased representation of sexuality, Cooper's novel seems to enact Foucault's historically-driven insight that claiming the prevalence of a form of sexuality over another is in itself a lie, a sheer fabrication.

Apart from highlighting the potential of sexuality to be manipulated through discourse(s), in *The Sluts*, Cooper also reflects on the process whereby such manipulation can become naturalized. The key to discussing this dynamic lies, no doubt, in Judith Butler's idea of performativity. In her 1990 book *Gender Trouble* she takes Foucault's discursive conception of sex one step further for the purpose of reflecting how these manipulations can end up culturally sanctioned as truth when, indeed, they are mere fabrications tightly woven by power relationships. For her, this is only possible because of the performativity inherent in gender and sex expression. Performativity relies on the idea that what appears to be an essence is, in fact, a repetition of gender and sex roles. Therefore, these two categories are "at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (1990:140). In other words, according to Butler, sexual and gendered identities are not essences but culturally sanctioned bodily acts, gestures, and movements which end up manifesting themselves as "social temporality" (1990:141). In order to put forward such view on sex and gender, she has to depart from Foucault in an important aspect. In the Foucauldian system, there is an existing sexed materiality that can be manipulated by discourse. For Butler, in contrast, not only gender, but even sex (the sexed body), are produced by discourse. Butler justifies the merging of these two categories as follows: "Gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or a 'natural sex' is produced and established as 'predicursive', prior to culture, a political neutral surface on which culture acts" (1990:11). Butler asserts that gender and sex categories are too close to be treated differently, especially since both cooperate towards the structuring of the matrix of heterosexual intelligibility which has traditionally governed desire operations: male/masculine/heterosexual and female/feminine/heterosexual. What is the point, then, in applying different concepts to such cooperating ideas? If gender is performative in that its

constituting features are socioculturally defined, sex (the sexed body) is equally performative in that it reenacts gendered norms that give way to, not only gendered identities, but also gendered bodies:

Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed [...]. There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the “expressions” that are said to be its results. (1990:33)

In sum, by showing the sexed body and gender as performativity, Butler, unlike Foucault, does not only seek to present these two categories as a piece of fiction that a power-group generates to meet their own interests. If she presents sex/gender as performativity it is also to problematize the very formation of the category “sexual identity”, the fact that we are just sanctioning as true something that is a copy of a copy, a simulacrum ritualized through the recursivity inherent in performance/discourse.

That *The Sluts* illustrates Foucault’s idea that sex can be discursively produced was something made clear at the beginning of this section. The next step is to explore whether the same happens with Butler’s performativity. Erotic desire in Cooper’s novel tries to pronounce itself, but it is impossible. If, at first sight, Brad’s body sets in the accounts of “bigman60”, “11bean”, “JoseR72” or “bizeeb7”—just to mention the handles of four of the many reviewers the novel includes—this will-to-shape, at the end of the novel, reveals itself as a fleeting *trompe-l’œil*, as a perverse fictive volume. Due to its unreliable narrator, there is no truth about sexuality outside its discourse—the words—that constructs it. Sexuality in *The Sluts* manifests itself, then, as performativity, as a discursive *continuum* whose limits are always active since they are permanently out of focus. Sexuality, the body on which sexuality is inscribed, does not exist beyond words and the performance they carry out. The sexed body that *The Sluts* produces is not only a lie grounded on the manipulation of discourse but also, to apply to Cooper Butler’s words, “a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions [...]” (1990:178). When, at the very end of *The Sluts*, the reader learns that all the sex and the sexed bodies in the novel are a lie, what emerges is the genesis of sexuality—to play again with Butler’s words: “the tacit collective agreement”—in the case of *The Sluts*, unconsciously made between the reader and Cooper—to support “discrete and polar genders [sexualities]”. In *The Sluts* the lie and the performativity it brings does not only obscure, but completely undermines, the credibility of the sexuality that is represented, to the point that the only possible truth for that sexuality is that it is neither nature nor an essence, but sheer discursive recursion—performativity, in the end. The reach of performativity in *The Sluts* goes beyond the novel itself because it portrays an aspect that can be preached upon any form of sexuality: that, if its

genealogy is traced, all we will arrive at is a fabrication. In other words, only by lying can the alleged truth of sex be claimed. The only thing that can get across an understanding of sexuality as truth is the fact that we are not aware of the lie that it implies, of how discourse on sexuality sanctions itself as true through that very same discourse. In this light, *The Sluts* stands out as an extremely brave attempt to capture in literary fiction one of the most slippery concepts of contemporary thinking: Butlerian performativity.

Apart from presenting sexual identity as an open category, performativity also allows both Butler and Cooper to avoid engaging with political struggle, something they highlight as paramount to their respective ethoi. In this respect, they clearly depart from Foucault, for whom the performative nature of sexuality and its discursively constructed undertone is a way to resist—the perfect platform for reverse discourse to happen: the same words used to insult a form of sexuality contain the kernel to structure a defense against the oppressing view (1984:101). Butler, however, renders reverse discourse obsolete, since in her system “the distinction between the personal and the political or between private and public is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive status quo: our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies” (Felluga 2011). So Butlerian performativity highlights that there is no point in getting involved in a political action whose goal is the liberation of oppressed natures, whether gendered or sexual. For her, it is the action lived in one's individual body that triggers possibilities of contestation and subversion that identity politics would never allow (Lloyd 1999).

In *The Sluts*, Cooper does not direct performativity towards Foucauldian reverse discourse, but at distancing himself from political struggle, just like Butler. Their non-denominationalism and disaffection with organized political action has brought both Cooper and Butler a great deal of criticism. The latter's notion of performativity, for example, has been criticized on the grounds that it would manifest itself as a drive that condemns the expression of sexuality through the sheer repetition of the heterocentric matrix, which would short-circuit any possibility for sexual creativity (Boucher 2006:214; Nigianni and Storr 2009). Another common criticism to Butlerian performativity comes from its failure—at least in Nussbaum's view—to engage with real-world concerns: “Butler suggests to her readers that this sly send-up of the *status quo* is the only script for resistance that life offers”. She would be encouraging women, Nussbaum continues, to “do politics in the safety of their campuses, remaining on the symbolic level, making subversive gestures at power through speech and gesture” (1999). Cooper has also been criticized in similar terms. His resistance to homonormalization and politization has translated into death threats—surprisingly enough from “Queer Nation” members after his book *Frisk* was released in 1991 (Wortman 2001)—or into comments like Michiko Kakutani's, who has written that, “unlike Dostoyevsky or Baudelaire,

contemporary artists like Cooper and Hirst [Demian] are just interested in sensationalism for sensation's sake. Their peek into the abyss isn't philosophically interesting; it's just an excuse for a self-congratulatory smirk" (1996:21).

Butler and Cooper's answer to their critics seems to be the same: Derridean *différance*. In "Critically Queer", Butler receives her alleged political disaffection by emphasizing that performativity allows gender—and implicitly sexuality—to show as "the kind of effect that resists calculation" (2000:29). Cooper's idea of sexuality in *The Sluts* shows a similar aim. Brad's body is portrayed as an endless chain of discursive proliferations whose main goal is to resist calculation. Mounted upon a lie on a computer screen, Brad does not ever show as a body. On the contrary, he remains perpetually suspended as a flux of representation which is unpredictable because it is imagined, made up. Both Butler and Cooper, therefore, conceive sexual performativity as a promise which cannot be kept, as something that is given and denied at the same time. In a nutshell, their performative systems allow them to understand sexuality as *différance*, as, in Jacques Derrida's words, "the play of a trace which no longer belongs to the horizon of Being, but whose play transports and encloses the meaning of Being: the play of the trace, or the *différance*, which has no meaning and is not, which does not belong. There is no maintaining, and no depth, to this bottomless chessboard on which Being is put into play" (1991:75).

If this Derridean notion of being is applied to Butler's conception of gender and sexuality, both these spheres reveal themselves as fluxes that surpass binary logics: they are neither constructed nor essential (metaphysical). Rather, they happen "intermezzo" and bring semantic disorder to traditionally sanctioned areas. They problematize both constructedness and naturalness by demonstrating that all forms of sexuality, no matter if they are oppressed or dominant, belong to the same regime of power: one that simultaneously polices and produces sexual content, forcing us to think our sexuality beyond a conventional political logic of domination and resistance. In Butler's own words: "performance' is not a singular act or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance" (1993:95). In line with Butler, the performative construction of Brad's body and the sexual desire it triggers on other bodies in *The Sluts*, in its endless undeterminedness as to-be-determinedness, makes the production of the "natural" subject possible (although it is not until the end of the novel that the reader finds out about Brad as a lie, the lie in itself is veiled as truth until the final moment of revelation). But, at the same time, precisely because the subject is constructed around a virtual lie, his naturalness, his truth, is also opened up to the possibility of his incoherence and contestation.

And yet, although Cooper highlights his heroes' sexuality as *différance*, it comes in a guise that is not present in Butler's system: the right to pleasure. Cooper

states so at the very end of his novel. "I'm telling you the truth because my conscience is bothering me. But I ask if you could keep this email between you and me, if you don't mind. At least that way people reading these reviews will feel like they got what they wanted even if they aren't happy about how it played out. Zack Young" (2005:262). The client who started everything is asking the webmaster, the only person who can unveil his plan, not to give it away, as it is the only way for the rest of the clients to "feel like they got what they wanted". He is, in fact, protecting the clients' right to sexual bliss. Brad's fate ("how it played out") is the least important detail in *The Sluts*. Rather, for Cooper, the ultimate aim of the performative sexual model that he sets out in his novel is to show that eroticism always sets off and comes back to bliss—not to lack, as in psychoanalysis, nor to oppression or empowerment, as in essentialist or constructivist stances on sexual identity. In Cooper's novel all the desire that performative sexuality triggers stems from the "what" in "they got what they wanted"—"what" is not "this" or "that" erotic practice. On the contrary, it is desire liberated from the constraints of metaphysical thinking and its liking for centered, root-based onto-epistemologies. *The Sluts*, therefore, reveals eroticism as a field of immanence, as what one wants regardless of any structure—whether social, oppressed, essential, constructed, orthodox or peripheral: pleasure at its best.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The role of Queer Theory in Dennis Cooper's imaginary stands out as a problematic issue, as the author himself has acknowledged on so many occasions. And yet the analysis of *The Sluts* undertaken in this study has demonstrated that Cooper's relationship with Queer Theory is more sympathetic than expected. This is because both onto-epistemologically and in terms of sexual identity formation, the novel relies on two of the most important pillars of Queer Theory: sexual prosthetization and performativity. In light of such apparent contradiction, a question arises: did Cooper change his view on Queer Theory with his 2005 novel, or is this a clear example of criticism relying too much on the author's own opinions? Whichever the case, what it shows is that Queer Theory reveals itself—at least in *The Sluts*, although it might be worth exploring in the rest of his work—, as a powerful exegetic tool that sheds light on one of the most challenging contemporary USA American literary projects.

Resuming to *The Sluts* again, Cooper turns desire into a prosthesis to surpass polarized understandings of sexuality, especially with regards to the essentialist/

constructivist schism. His aim in undertaking the prosthetization of desire is, then, to emphasize that a form of sexuality that opts for one or the other end clearly stigmatizes certain erotic modes politically, while at the same time denies that sexuality is constantly subject to processes of transformation and change. Cooperian performativity, in its turn, entangles a form of sexuality which is only defined by zones of intensity, thresholds, gradients, flux. Eroticism feels like it is real but, at the same time, bears the points of deterritorialization of the lines of flight. That is, the performative nature of *The Sluts* presents sexuality as a force whose only aim is to affect and to be affected, to enact pleasure. Maybe this pleasure is the only truth that can be preached upon sexuality: “They [the heroes in Cooper's novel] got WHAT they wanted”, did you?

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