

## PERFORMANCES OF A CONTESTED BODY: HOMO/EROTICISM AND AGEING

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### Abstract

This paper resulted from my doctoral research that investigated forms of gender and sexuality control in their interface with the normative discourses that influence the process of ageing in Porto Alegre city, in the South of Brazil. One of the aims of the research was to map, and understand, how strategies of contestation of the often derogatory discourses on homosexuality and ageing are produced. Therefore, the study focused on the performances and sexual practices of elderly men who engage in homoerotic practices in two different places of homo-socialisation: a gay sauna and a nightclub. Through cartography of “the social life of the body” (Butler, 2004 [1997], p. 238), two research plans were designed in order to allow the understanding of the processes of objectification and resistance that underlie the discursive production on homosexuality and ageing. The first plan relates to the sexual experiences of elderly men in a gay sauna. The second one addresses the networks of sociability developed around elderly men and gay escorts (male sex workers) in a nightclub. These two paths of problematization led to an approach to the disputes involving the discursive frames of the hetero/homonormativity (Duggan, 2003; Louro, 2009) as important instruments in the production and/or maintenance of the status of abjection assigned to the old man homosexual for several times.

**Keywords:** body – ageing – performativity – gender – sexuality – homoeroticism.

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“Pleasure/Bliss: Terminologically, there is always vacillation – I stumble, I err. In any case, there will be always a margin of indecision, the distinction will not be the source of absolute classifications, the paradigm will falter, the meaning will be precarious, revocable, reversible, the discourse will be incomplete”

(Barthes, 1975, p. 4)

### I. Introduction

This comprehensive study<sup>1</sup> investigated forms of gender and sexuality control in their interface with the normative discourses that influence the experience of ageing. The research<sup>2</sup> aims to understand how norms and discourses shape the body, producing its (discursive) materiality and its supposed “evidence,” thereby turning it into a “fact.” The goal was to problematize the games of truth (Foucault, 2001a/ 1984) surrounding the homoerotic practices in the experience of elderly men. Through cartography of “the social life of the body” (Butler, 2004/ 1997, p. 238), two research branches were developed to allow the understanding of the processes of objectification and resistance that underlie the discursive production on homosexuality and ageing.

The first research branch relates to the sexual experiences of elderly men in a gay sauna. The second one, on the other hand, addresses the networks of sociability developed around elderly men and gay escorts (male sex workers) in a nightclub. These two methods of analysis led to an approach to the disputes involving the discursive frames of the hetero/homonormativity (Duggan, 2003; Louro, 2009) as important instruments in the production and/or maintenance of the status of abjection assigned to the old man homosexual.

By focusing on the problems posed by the post-modern game of “appearances” (representations), this study opens new possibilities to think about the erotic practices in which elderly men engage. Therefore, it used as research material the performances and memories of experiences of disobedience of these dissident bodies. The ageing body was understood from the perspective of a materiality that embodies and disembodies discourses; a perspective that highlights the endless, tireless and fictional works of rules. The bodies of the elderly men whose practices were investigated in this PhD research deny their destinies

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1 This paper presents results of my doctoral thesis, defended in the postgraduate program in Education at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, supervised by Dr. Guacira Lopes Louro (UFRGS/ Brazil). (Pocahy, 2011)

2 Contents of this paper were previously published in the following journals: F. A. (2012). “Vem meu menino, deixa eu causar inveja”: ressignificações de si nas transas do sexo tarifado. *Sex., Salud Soc. (Rio J.)*, Ago, no.11, p.122-154 ; Pocahy, F. A. (2012) Entre vapores & vídeos pornô:dissidências homo/eróticas na trama discursiva do envelhecimento masculino. *Rev. Estud. Fem.*, Ago, vol.20, no.2, p.357-376 ; Pocahy, F. A (2012). Velhice como Performativo: Dissidências (Homo)Eróticas. *Ex aequo*, no.26, p.43-56.

through performances carried out with (some) pleasure, (some) invention, (some) grace, (some) challenges and with some negotiation, producing a sort of ascetic movement for a creative life (Foucault, 2001a/1984).

I put together unusual, situational and ephemeral narratives of elderly men, namely narratives that were produced in dissident scenarios. What I could see in the slippery surroundings of a gay sauna and a bar was a temporary image of elderly gay men in their erotic movements, occupying certain positions in the city and embodying the common representations of a desirable body. In other words, this study is a cartography that points to a *(homo)erotica* in the city. It follows the design of an erotic scene that is determined at the very moment of its occurrence and political experience. Nevertheless, it is not a steady route, since nothing is/was decided. The existential and erotic scenes continue to be (re) determined. What I can visualize here is just an instant of an ever changing and political bodily experience.

I could make conjectures, but in this introduction I would prefer to address a few questions that were important guidelines for this work: What is the role of age in (homo)sexual experiences? How does the old body embody or disembody (resist) the set of disputes that involve social recognition and belonging, which, in turn, involve the processes of intelligibility influenced by gender and sexuality? As Judith Butler puts, intelligibility is “decided before any individual decision” (Butler, 2004 /1997, p. 203).

## 2. Epistemological and Methodological Approaches

Based on the works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, I examined how gender rules engage with age and the representations of the ageing process to form a certain image of the old homosexual. Although I know that rules govern the discourse, it is important to point out that they produce, and control, the subject of discourse, making the (bodily) lives of individuals (Butler, 2004) and inhabiting bodies, as is the case of the protagonist of this study - the discursive materiality of the old body. Based on previous studies (Pocahy & Nardi, 2007) I tried to go deeper into the type of erotic movements that could indicate forms of resistance to the norm with the help of a fieldwork based on the perspective of an “observant participation” (Mendes-Leite, 1994), and on a deconstructive point of view. The only thing I could be temporarily sure about was that the experience brought by these disobedient, dissident, so-called sexual minorities (Louro, 2004) could highlight the continuity and discontinuity of the discursive games that capture the body, thereby giving evidence of the fictional character of social rules.

From this perspective, I consider that erotic and sexual practices might somehow disrupt gender (Louro, 2004) from the interior of its discursive production, destabilising the rules that produce “gender-sexualized” identities. I argue that sexual practices can disrupt representations. However, I also believe that those practices can say everything about the individuals themselves. The people presented in this research article are the interlocutors of a morality that surrounds, and pervades, gendered bodies and sexual practices.

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In this research work, I made some arrangements from situational and ephemeral narratives of a body interpellated as “minor.” Based on the hints suggesting an approximate image of an elder, from a clandestine and stigmatized terrain, what I could follow was a provisory image of this “old man,” occupying a possible place in the city and in his movements of eroticism, “deforming” the “normal” representations of a so-called “desirable” body.

Therefore, this research consisted in a cartography of, what I term, a “(homo)erotiCity” – which means a homosexual erotica taking place in a city - and dissident scenes. In addition, it follows a scene of eroticism that is decided at the very moment of its own experimentation and based on its political-epistemological ground.

So, as this is not a map, nothing in this study was previously determined, nor can it be represented. The existential and erotic pictures were being (re)designed and modified, and keep on occurring that way. What I can follow here is only a moment of something producing a sketch of the political experience of corporality.

Although these practices do not have the power to completely break with gender rules, even in the most disobedient forms of experimentation that I could witness during the fieldwork between 2007 and 2010, the images of the subjects performing the scenes offered me possibilities to widen my reflection about the theatre of compulsory heteronormativity, and the “pocket shows” of hetero- and homonormativity. I consider heteronormativity, as well as homonormativity, forms of performance, as they are produced and maintained through performative utterances.

### 3. The many ages of a body: ageing as a performance

I consider age and gender apparatuses that produce the conditions of possibility for certain gender performances, whether they pervert the rule or not. However, the fictional character of rules, and the constant repetition that reinforces it, can also produce failures in this system that cause some lives to live the limits of abjection (Butler, 1997; 2000; 2005d). From these failures, materialized in practices, I noticed that it is impossible to think of sexual or gender identities outside the rule, since they are produced by the very apparatus that makes their “identification” possible. However, this does not mean that ruptures cannot take place.

I believe that one of the ways in which heteronormativity can be challenged is by micro-movements. Although “navigating among norms that are laid out in advance or prior to one’s choice” (Butler, 2004, p. 7), people can say something about themselves: by gestures, by their narratives and the way they organize themselves in the scenes they create in the places they choose to stay. Therefore, they can exercise some kind of self-determination and negotiation, articulating representations in performative schemes.

It would be nonsense to think that the rule, in its constant repetition, always works in the same way, producing the same effects. The very components of the normative discourse are always subject to failure. Repetition produces the illusion that rule is natural. However,

on the other hand, its failures reveal its fictional and artificial character. Maybe that is the reason why we sometimes can have a glimpse of the rule by suffering its own effects. As Foucault (1995) would state: power in its strategic situation cannot be thought of without *resistance*, so the norm in its constant repetition gives opportunity to a change in the game.

This weakness of the norm can be seen in the silent traffic of meanings (Preciado, 2009) that occurs within biopolitics, eroding the discursive power/knowledge machinery. If we are a type of effect of the discourse, produced by games of power/knowledge, that does not mean that we deny the evidence of what makes us living creatures – organs, skin and senses. However, it is the very concept of “nature” that turns the body into a surface on which games of truth have an effect. As it occurs in the games that turned sexuality into a power apparatus: “at the same time, a mechanism of knowledge, of knowledge of individuals, of knowledge over individuals, but also of knowledge by individuals over themselves and for themselves” (Foucault, 1999 / 1978, p.126).

We become socially recognized not only by the material substance of our bodies, but also by the discursive lines that turn our bodies into discursive “substance.” So, if I question the games of truth, I pose a question to my own “constitution and ontology” (Butler, 2006). As Foucault states:

“If power takes hold of the body, it isn’t through its having first been interiorized in people’s consciousness. There is a network or circuit of bio-power, or soma-to-power, which acts as the formative matrix of sexuality itself as the historical and cultural phenomenon with which we seem at once to recognize and lose ourselves”

(Foucault, 1980/ 1977, p.186)

Judith Butler (2005a; 2005b; 2005c) gives us an understanding of the key role of the Other in the struggle for recognition. According to her, we cannot live fully at the expense of the Other’s interpellation; neither can we live without interpellating others from a given position.

In this study I followed the ways in which the body can perform its fiction – this discursive production that comes with the political project of modernity - especially the invention of this particular arrangement that articulates oppositions, continuities and discontinuities involving age, gender and homosexuality. As Foucault (1980/ 1977, p.193) once said: “one ‘fictions’ history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one ‘fictions’ a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth.”

I focused on a singular process of ageing: the ageing of men who identify themselves as homosexuals, or men who take part in homoerotic networks of socialisation, and have sex with other men. Even though I recognize all the violence and difficulties that elderly homosexuals may face in a heterosexual society, I tried to move away from the perspective of victimization. I worked with the concept of “ageing” as an effect of the discursive performance of compulsory heterosexuality, and of hetero- and homonormativity. Some of the most important political and conceptual challenges in this work were to elucidate how

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these men lived and organized their lives faced by the discourses that make them be, and say, who they are and what they are.

The idea of age, or that we belong to a certain age, provides a framework for intelligibility of the subject; the intelligibility of ourselves and our lives. We think about ourselves and the people around us as teenagers, adults, children, elderly. Many possibilities or impossibilities that we may have in front of us are deeply dependent upon the stages of life (as upon the cultural conditions given to us) and how old we are. This happens mostly due to a discursive apparatus that tries to place the subjects so that someone or something can be recognized and “cited” as a possible, or even impossible, precarious subject. This apparatus works constantly to produce that sense of continuity that turns what would be erratic or unstable into something that takes on the character of something natural and stable. As Butler (1993, p. 95) states, “performativity cannot be understood outside a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of the norm.” In addition, she continues to say that this “ritualized production”, in its ceaseless repetition, is what “enables the subject and constitutes its temporary conditions.”

I agree with Rose-Marie Lagrave (2009) when she describes ageing as a privileged position for contestation of gender norms and heteronormativity. In fact, I will even emphasize it and say that we may understand it as a moment of rebellion and subversion, not only a moment of resignation and need, as the great majority of society understands it to be. Lagrave proposes that “questioning the order of “ages” is a way to delight oneself again, since we question the evidences of ageing on the basis of new risks, rearranging unusual cognitive and political resources and crossing the reciprocal effects between the order of genders and the order of ages” (2009, p. 113).

Age, gender, sexuality, social class and race are historical and political categories that do not operate alone. On the contrary, they have interfaces with each other. For instance, we could hardly think about the category of age without connecting it with gender, generation, or race. Therefore, age is one of the categories that organize life in different ways and socio-political contexts. Some gender and sexuality performances only become possible through a discourse on age, imposing what is right or wrong for each stage of life. Therefore, it seems strategic to investigate how age creates conditions of intelligibility, and how it articulates with gender and sexuality in the face of the biopolitical project of western societies.

#### 4. Homoerotic dissidences

There are many disputes involving the meanings of the ageing process, but sexuality is one of the dynamic apparatus of biopolitics (Foucault, 1997/ 1976) that operates in a particular way “as time goes by,” making the old body captive of medical, religious, educational and legal morality. Somehow, I could consider the idea that the elderly would have a hard time trying to incorporate more flexible gender and sexual conducts. However, this is most certainly a normative concept. Surely, as Michel Bozon (2009, p. 125) states, “the older generations of today practice a broader repertoire than those of yesterday, since they

spent their adult life in a context of expanding possibilities and diversification of affective trajectories.”

In this sense, a norm creates fictions that give a sense of continuity and eternity to those attributes of gender and sexuality that are understood as belonging to each stage of life. However, in its performative regulations, sometimes the norm misses some agonistic forms of contestation and reframing. This is the type of problematization that guided the reflections produced during the fieldwork of my research. Following the thought of Foucault, problematization here means to carry out an analysis that makes it possible to understand the set of discursive and non-discursive practices that make something enter into the play of true and false, and makes it as an object for thought (Foucault, 2001c).

Therefore, I organized a set of reflections about the possibilities open in the limits of the big grey continent (Le Breton, 2008/ 1990), as the sexuality of the elderly is represented. A “continent” created in the modern project where “ageing slowly slips out of the symbolic field, it moves away from the values of modernity: youth, charms, vitality, work, good performances, velocity” (Le Breton, 2008/ 1990, p.210). In this study I also problematized how a body that is considered by many as “unproductive,” “disqualified,” “precarious,” “bizarre” and/or “monstrous” is contested, or maintained, within the so-called homosexual or LGBT cultures. I make a connection between the meanings that are articulated in modern life and in the government of the living (Foucault, 2006/ 1976).

In the course of the analysis, I reconstructed scenes and performances that break parts of the borders of the normative regime of sexuality, and the political paradigm that it represents. The performances narrated in the thesis somehow disrupt the discursive games of identity and difference (Silva, 2007). The fact that someone identifies himself as homosexual, gay, faggot, sissy, old or simply “man” may mean that the “one” implied is subject to the norm, but the meanings and changes that the named terms may take vary with time and context, and in some ways, subvert pervasive gender and age norms or surrender to them. According to Butler, “when one declares that one is homosexual, the declaration is the performative act – not homosexuality” (Butler, 1997, p. 22).

The men who participated in my research were sixty or older (the oldest was seventy). They were people who constantly negotiate with political categories and discourses that have been produced since, and from, the sexual liberation movements, and that are part of the tensions involving the contemporary social and cultural politics of gender and sexuality.

Despite the fact that my research work “speaks about” these men (some of whom were silent speakers of the scenes cartographed), it kept their secrets, especially about the categorization of sexual identities of the participants. After all, many of the men who attended the places investigated did not identify themselves as homosexuals. On the other hand, it was not my intention to search for the signs of the past, evoking the wounds of shame, humiliation, neglect and violence among those who affirmatively identified themselves as gays or homosexuals, although one can say that those men certainly lived more difficult times in terms of social protection and the guarantee of rights.

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I also prevented myself from the dangers of finding in the past some kind of “glamorous” time, where the body could be considered more beautiful and strong, and life could be considered better than now. I was careful about that, especially in the interviews with the elderly men, in order to avoid some kind of nostalgia for the young body and life. The idea of always referring old people to their past can carry the danger of keeping them away from their present, which could somehow reaffirm that their present moment (the moment in which they are not young anymore) is not worth living or even thinking about.

I agree with Lagrave (2009) when she states that to work on one’s own shame is also to think about the status and the place of desire in the economy of ageing, but a certain deviation from this idea was necessary in the course of this research: a silence about shame. In fact, I found out that working with the idea of shame could bring out resentments that could silence what I found to be the most subversive thing in this research – the set of scenes where elderly men throw themselves and their bodies into the intensity of eroticism. Furthermore, even though shame and resentment may be part of the daily life of the men whose practices were studied in this research, I feared that they could silence the pleasures experienced by them and their bodies. As a result, the accounts given by the men in this study revealed less of the sufferings than of the pleasures they experience. This allowed us to see the ageing experience from a different point of view in which the focus is not victimization.

The stories and accounts gathered in my research were not those of complaints and resentment. Instead, they showed possibilities of contestation that are important to make us think of what we are doing to ourselves and what we are becoming. What mattered was not only to think of what the subject is, who or what somebody is, but also to follow the movements of the subject in his process of “becoming” (Butler, 2005c).

I wrote about moments, situations and aesthetical arrangements which showed the struggles with standardized definitions of what it means to be old and homosexual in a society that is completely obsessed with youth and beauty. The analysis pointed to performances that may disrupt the current and derisive representations of homosexuality and ageing that are produced also within homosexual subcultures.

Our society is not short on derisive representations of the elderly homosexuals as perverts and promiscuous people, whose abnormal sexuality insistently remains active when it should not. As Simões (2004) states, as a result of these representations, the elderly are seen as a category of people whose only option would be to enjoy sexuality in paid for, quick and risky company. But what kinds of problems arise when we think of the types of sociability characterised by impersonal sexual contacts, and sometimes really risky situations that these practices may carry?

Horacio Sívori (2005) indicates that the multiple practices occurring within the vast territory of the sexuality of the so-called “sexual minorities” can put the limits of the sexual norm at stake. These practices involve not only subjugation to the norm, but also, resistance and creativity. Following the thought of Judith Butler (2005c, p. 334), maybe the concept of gender in homosexuality requires new forms of theorization that overcome the categories of male and female, masculinity and femininity, which could displace the binary bounds of pervasive gender norms.

In the face of the agonistic relations entangled with homosexuality and ageing, I looked for dissidences and interruptions in homo- and heterosexual norms that could be provided by the scenarios and practices involving old men and homoeroticism. What I found were men that, constrained by the discourses defining ageing as a category they belong to and that condemn them to the limits of a “good” society, challenge the norm and dare to say their name, their age and to live their sexuality. Driven by this finding, I constantly asked myself about the possibility to consider the practices surrounding sex among men and homoeroticism as ways to contest the cultural, and often derisive, representations of ageing.

## 5. Conclusion

Our age – how old we are – is a means of giving intelligibility to what can be considered as a socially possible life, produced from institutional and political engagements to cultural arrangements. In this way, we are before a discursive negotiation that will only try to situate the subject in a knowable way and as a subject that can be “cited” – that produces experimentations of itself from “citationalities” – as a possible or thinkable subject.

I understand age as a political, historical and contingent category, as well as gender, social class, sexuality or “race.” Many are the disputes involving the significations of ageing, but I risk suggesting that maybe sexuality works as this dynamical instrument of biopolitics that operates in a particular way with the burden of age, subjecting a body to medical, religious, educational and juridical moralities for longer.

In a way, it would be possible to take into consideration the idea that elders would have difficulties incorporating certain flexibilizations related to gender and sexuality conducts, as Bozon (2009) says. However, I believe this is offered more as a normative disorder/problem. In this way, we can think that a norm, its representations and the performances produced from its discursive engenderment, generates fictions that try to perpetuate gender and sexuality attributes for each stage of life. However, this control and measure let scape ways of contestation and resignification in the agonistic (dispute) of the generational tensions, providing conditions for new arrangements of pleasure and subjectivities.

Another way of abject production about ageing emerges in the experience of homonormativity. This normative form does not hesitate in signifying as precarious and despicable the spaces of sociability of the so-called “deviants” from the good model of homosexuality, or the good gender of homosexuality. The sauna and the porno cinema are surely spaces considered as unthinkable – the “real impossible” (Butler, 2005a /1990) – and start being represented as inferior, despicable, precarious, repugnant, abnormal. The significations attributed to these places work in the sense of inferiorizing (hierarchizing) and producing a certain performative enunciation of a miserable and sad life, applying a “punishment” (by exclusion and disqualification) to those “lost souls” and those “undesirable” bodies from the viewpoint of a hetero and homonormativity. As Foucault (2001b/ 1973) well points out: norms that take over the bodies and inscribe on them the marks of power. An abject body many times turned into an exemplary object of punishment to those who dare to contradict what is established as a socially legible and eligible life.

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Before the narratives produced from the field interviews, I did not choose the complaint about suffering as explanation of the sexuality experience and it did not occupy a space of intelligibility, as it occurs in many studies where a certain victimized perspective can be observed. This was the route chosen as I got closer to the field and it provided a possibility of seeing the ageing experience in a different way; that is, not as a lament or victimization, but as strategies of recognition and experimentation of ageing. We do not have here a meeting of complaints or resentment, but a (re)meeting that intended to search for possibilities of contestation that helps one to think about what we are doing to ourselves. The research followed movements of escapes and delights that evidenced ways of life less tormented by the ghosts of homosexuality and of ageing.

The question of my study was not knowing what the subject is, what someone is, but to follow the “eternal becoming.” That is, what one is lucky to become, even if it is only a short stay in a sauna, or some hours in a porno cinema or porno video store, fugacious and unfinished heterotopias, other spaces, with no place in the imaginary real of the gender norms and in the uses of pleasures.

Before a dispute for the significations of ageing, I found elders who astonish those representing scientific and cultural moralities. Elders who, driven by the discourses that define ageing as a category of belonging to the great gray continent of sexuality (Le Breton, 2008 /1990), agitates himself and dares to say his name (and maybe his age) in a not very “advisable” situation – living his sexuality on the “zone” of abjection.

My research problem was, and remains, the norm. This means that the interlocutors here are not to represent post-identitary movements or great ruptures in the truth regime about gender. Conversely, they allow me to follow movements of those who produce themselves and live by subverting the norm, (re-)inventing pleasures and sociabilities searching for novelty.

This approach allowed me to follow an analysis essay that makes an effort towards exhaustion (in the sense of a certain tiredness) of the ways of representation that surround us, interpellate us, position us in a place of enunciating the desire and the pleasures by the device of age. These scenes and positions of subjects that I brought in this article are exception movements: essays that try to loosen the norms, especially the normalities surrounding the experiences of subjectivation through sexuality and gender.

What one can see and hear in the midst of steam, whispers and moans is the slippery movement of a body in an eternal becoming, self-banished from the disciplines and canonical moralities that, in some way, returned to his own body, as an always unfinished surface, refuses his measures and supposed sociocultural intelligibilities for some moments; maybe the old impolite body.

The body is a political fiction; its forms are forged and built in apparatuses of gender, sexuality, age, colour, ethnicity and size. The “young” body, the body full of strength, beauty and speed, is the body built by the modern utopia, an ideal proposed but hardly achieved.

Are there other possibilities to think about the body outside the restrictive norms that constantly constrain it? One can hardly state that. After all, at the very moment when a

norm is weakened, others can be generated. However, the performances and movements produced by the men in this research may show us that the game is not over and that there can always be changes. The body is the place in which we can play this match (game).

The body, I risk saying, can be the site of a heterotopia, a place for otherness, desires that go beyond the “desirable” in disobedient moves, shapes, colours and tastes. As Foucault (2009, p. 20) comments in *Les corps utopique, Les heterotopias*, maybe here is the reason why we enjoy sex so much: “because in sex the body is here.”

The importance of such themes as ageing and homosexuality is political; not because of a pragmatic matter, but because the gendered, sexualized, racialized and aged body (in all of its normative reductions) is the site of power relations that capture all subjects. The performances, scenarios and accounts that are part of the present work may sometimes subvert, sometimes conform to the norm. My question was in which measure they did it and how they did it.

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F. A. Pocahy