

**GENDER TROUBLE**

Feminism and the Subversion of Identity

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## Preface (1999)

Ten years ago I completed the manuscript of *Gender Trouble* and sent it to Routledge for publication. I did not know that the text would have as wide an audience as it has had, nor did I know that it would constitute a provocative “intervention” in feminist theory or be cited as one of the founding texts of queer theory. The life of the text has exceeded my intentions, and that is surely in part the result of the changing context of its reception. As I wrote it, I understood myself to be in an embattled and oppositional relation to certain forms of feminism, even as I understood the text to be part of feminism itself. I was writing in the tradition of immanent critique that seeks to provoke critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought to which it belongs. There was and remains warrant for such a mode of criticism and to distinguish between self-criticism that promises a more democratic and inclusive life for the movement and criticism that seeks to undermine it altogether. Of course, it is always possible to misread the former as the latter, but I would hope that that will not be done in the case of *Gender Trouble*.

In 1989 I was most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory. I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity. It was and remains my view that any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences. It seemed to me, and continues to seem, that feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion. In particular, I opposed those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original. The point was not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might then serve as a model for readers of the text. Rather, the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized. One might wonder what use “opening up possibilities” finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is “impossible,” illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.

*Gender Trouble* sought to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions. The text also sought to undermine any and all efforts to wield a discourse of truth to delegitimize minority gendered and sexual practices. This doesn't mean that all minority practices are to be condoned or celebrated, but it does mean that we ought to be able to think them before we come to any kinds of conclusions about them. What worried me most were the ways that the panic in the face of such practices rendered them unthinkable. Is the breakdown of gender binaries, for instance, so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?

Some of these kinds of presumptions were found in what was called “French Feminism” at the time, and they enjoyed great popularity among literary scholars and some social theorists.

Even as I opposed what I took to be the heterosexism at the core of sexual difference fundamentalism, I also drew from French poststructuralism to make my points. My work in *Gender Trouble* turned out to be one of cultural translation. Poststructuralist theory was brought to bear on U.S. theories of gender and the political predicaments of feminism. If in some of its guises, poststructuralism appears as a formalism, aloof from questions of social context and political aim, that has not been the case with its more recent American appropriations. Indeed, my point was not to “apply” poststructuralism to feminism, but to subject those theories to a specifically feminist reformulation. Whereas some defenders of poststructuralist formalism express dismay at the avowedly “thematic” orientation it receives in works such as *Gender Trouble*, the critiques of poststructuralism within the cultural Left have expressed strong skepticism toward the claim that anything politically progressive can come of its premises. In both accounts, however, poststructuralism is considered something unified, pure, and monolithic. In recent years, however, that theory, or set of theories, has migrated into gender and sexuality studies, postcolonial and race studies. It has lost the formalism of its earlier instance and acquired a new and transplanted life in the domain of cultural theory. There are continuing debates about whether my own work or the work of Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, or Slavoj Žižek belongs to cultural studies or critical theory, but perhaps such questions simply show that the strong distinction between the two enterprises has broken down. There will be theorists who claim that all of the above belong to cultural studies, and there will be cultural studies practitioners who define themselves against all manner of theory (although not, significantly, Stuart Hall, one of the founders of cultural studies in Britain). But both sides of the debate sometimes miss the point that the face of theory has changed precisely through its cultural appropriations. There is a new venue for theory, necessarily impure, where it emerges in and as the very event of cultural translation. This is not the displacement of theory by historicism, nor a simple historicization of theory that exposes the contingent limits of its more generalizable claims. It is, rather, the emergence of theory at the site where cultural horizons meet, where the demand for translation is acute and its promise of success, uncertain.

*Gender Trouble* is rooted in “French Theory,” which is itself a curious American construction. Only in the United States are so many disparate theories joined together as if they formed some kind of unity. Although the book has been translated into several languages and has had an especially strong impact on discussions of gender and politics in Germany, it will emerge in France, if it finally does, much later than in other countries. I mention this to underscore that the apparent Francocentrism of the text is at a significant distance from France and from the life of theory in France. *Gender Trouble* tends to read together, in a syncretic vein, various French intellectuals (Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Wittig) who had few alliances with one another and whose readers in France rarely, if ever, read one another. Indeed, the intellectual promiscuity of the text marks it precisely as American and makes it foreign to a French context. So does its emphasis on the Anglo-American sociological and anthropological tradition of “gender” studies,

which is distinct from the discourse of “sexual difference” derived from structuralist inquiry. If the text runs the risk of Eurocentrism in the U.S., it has threatened an “Americanization” of theory in France for those few French publishers who have considered it.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, “French Theory” is not the only language of this text. It emerges from a long engagement with feminist theory, with the debates on the socially constructed character of gender, with psychoanalysis and feminism, with Gayle Rubin’s extraordinary work on gender, sexuality, and kinship, Esther Newton’s groundbreaking work on drag, Monique Wittig’s brilliant theoretical and fictional writings, and with gay and lesbian perspectives in the humanities. Whereas many feminists in the 1980s assumed that lesbianism meets feminism in lesbian-feminism, *Gender Trouble* sought to refuse the notion that lesbian practice instantiates feminist theory, and set up a more troubled relation between the two terms. Lesbianism in this text does not represent a return to what is most important about being a woman; it does not consecrate femininity or signal a gynocentric world. Lesbianism is not the erotic summation of a set of political beliefs (sexuality and belief are related in a much more complex fashion, and very often at odds with one another). Instead, the text asks, how do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man? If gender is no longer to be understood as consolidated through normative sexuality, then is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts?

The idea that sexual practice has the power to destabilize gender emerged from my reading of Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” and sought to establish that normative sexuality fortifies normative gender. Briefly, one is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one’s sense of place in gender. I take it that this is the first formulation of “gender trouble” in this text. I sought to understand some of the terror and anxiety that some people suffer in “becoming gay,” the fear of losing one’s place in gender or of not knowing who one will be if one sleeps with someone of the ostensibly “same” gender. This constitutes a certain crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language. This issue has become more acute as we consider various new forms of gendering that have emerged in light of transgenderism and transsexuality, lesbian and gay parenting, new butch and femme identities. When and why, for instance, do some butch lesbians who become parents become “dads” and others become “moms”?

What about the notion, suggested by Kate Bornstein, that a transsexual cannot be described by the noun of “woman” or “man,” but must be approached through active verbs that attest to the constant transformation which “is” the new identity or, indeed, the “in-betweenness” that puts the being of gendered identity into question? Although some lesbians argue that butches have nothing to do with “being a man,” others insist that their butchness is or was only a route to a desired status as a man. These paradoxes have surely proliferated in recent years, offering evidence of a kind of gender trouble that the text itself did not anticipate.<sup>2</sup>

But what is the link between gender and sexuality that I sought to underscore? Certainly, I do not mean to claim that forms of sexual practice produce certain genders, but only that under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality. Catharine MacKinnon offers a formulation of this problem that resonates with my own at the same time that there are, I believe, crucial and important differences between us. She writes:

Stopped as an attribute of a person, sex inequality takes the form of gender; moving as a relation between people, it takes the form of sexuality. Gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women.<sup>3</sup>

In this view, sexual hierarchy produces and consolidates gender. It is not heterosexual normativity that produces and consolidates gender, but the gender hierarchy that is said to underwrite heterosexual relations. If gender hierarchy produces and consolidates gender, and if gender hierarchy presupposes an operative notion of gender, then gender is what causes gender, and the formulation culminates in tautology. It may be that MacKinnon wants merely to outline the self-reproducing mechanism of gender hierarchy, but this is not what she has said.

Is “gender hierarchy” sufficient to explain the conditions for the production of gender? To what extent does gender hierarchy serve a more or less compulsory heterosexuality, and how often are gender norms policed precisely in the service of shoring up heterosexual hegemony?

Katherine Franke, a contemporary legal theorist, makes innovative use of both feminist and queer perspectives to note that by assuming the primacy of gender hierarchy to the production of gender, MacKinnon also accepts a presumptively heterosexual model for thinking about sexuality. Franke offers an alternative model of gender discrimination to MacKinnon’s, effectively arguing that sexual harassment is the paradigmatic allegory for the production of gender. Not all discrimination can be understood as harassment. The act of harassment may be one in which a person is “made” into a certain gender. But there are others ways of enforcing gender as well. Thus, for Franke, it is important to make a provisional distinction between gender and sexual discrimination. Gay people, for instance, may be discriminated against in positions of employment because they fail to “appear” in accordance with accepted gendered norms. And the sexual harassment of gay people may well take place not in the service of shoring up gender hierarchy, but in promoting gender normativity.

Whereas MacKinnon offers a powerful critique of sexual harassment, she institutes a regulation of another kind: to have a gender means to have entered already into a heterosexual relationship of subordination. At an analytic level, she makes an equation that resonates with some dominant forms of homophobic argument. One such view prescribes and condones the sexual ordering of gender, maintaining that men who are men will be straight, women who are women will be straight. There is another set of

views, Franke's included, which offers a critique precisely of this form of gender regulation. There is thus a difference between sexist and feminist views on the relation between gender and sexuality: the sexist claims that a woman only exhibits her womanness in the act of heterosexual coitus in which her subordination becomes her pleasure (an essence emanates and is confirmed in the sexualized subordination of women); a feminist view argues that gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women. The latter accepts the power of the former's orthodox description, accepts that the former's description already operates as powerful ideology, but seeks to oppose it.

I belabor this point because some queer theorists have drawn an analytic distinction between gender and sexuality, refusing a causal or structural link between them. This makes good sense from one perspective: if what is meant by this distinction is that heterosexual normativity ought *not* to order gender, and that such ordering ought to be opposed, I am firmly in favor of this view.<sup>4</sup> If, however, what is meant by this is that (descriptively speaking), there is no sexual regulation of gender, then I think an important, but not exclusive, dimension of how homophobia works is going unrecognized by those who are clearly most eager to combat it. It is important for me to concede, however, that the performance of gender subversion can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice. Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all. Sometimes gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact.<sup>5</sup> Thus, no correlation can be drawn, for instance, between drag or transgender and sexual practice, and the dis-tribution of hetero-, bi-, and homo-inclinations cannot be predictably mapped onto the travels of gender bending or changing.

Much of my work in recent years has been devoted to clarifying and revising the theory of performativity that is outlined in *Gender Trouble*.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to say precisely what performativity is not only because my own views on what "performativity" might mean have changed over time, most often in response to excellent criticisms,<sup>7</sup> but because so many others have taken it up and given it their own formulations. I originally took my clue on how to read the performativity of gender from Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka's "Before the Law." There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.<sup>8</sup>

Several important questions have been posed to this doctrine, and one seems especially noteworthy to mention here. The view that gender is performative sought to

show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures. Does this mean that every-thing that is understood as "internal" about the psyche is therefore evacuated, and that internality is a false metaphor? Although *Gender Trouble* clearly drew upon the metaphor of an internal psyche in its early discussion of gender melancholy, that emphasis was not brought forward into the thinking of performativity itself.<sup>9</sup> Both *The Psychic Life of Power* and several of my recent articles on psychoanalytic topics have sought to come to terms with this problem, what many have seen as a problematic break between the early and later chapters of this book. Although I would deny that all of the internal world of the psyche is but an effect of a stylized set of acts, I continue to think that it is a significant theoretical mistake to take the "internality" of the psychic world for granted. Certain features of the world, including people we know and lose, do become "internal" features of the self, but they are transformed through that interiorization, and that inner world, as the Kleinians call it, is constituted precisely as a consequence of the interiorizations that a psyche performs. This suggests that there may well be a psychic theory of performativity at work that calls for greater exploration.

Although this text does not answer the question of whether the materiality of the body is fully constructed, that has been the focus of much of my subsequent work, which I hope will prove clarifying for the reader.<sup>10</sup> The question of whether or not the theory of performativity can be transposed onto matters of race has been explored by several scholars.<sup>11</sup> I would note here not only that racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on gender in ways that need to be made explicit, but that race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies. I would therefore suggest that the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race. Many of these debates have centered on the status of "construction," whether race is constructed in the same way as gender. My view is that no single account of construction will do, and that these categories always work as background for one another, and they often find their most powerful articulation through one another. Thus, the sexualization of racial gender norms calls to be read through multiple lenses at once, and the analysis surely illuminates the limits of gender as an exclusive category of analysis.<sup>12</sup>

Although I've enumerated some of the academic traditions and debates that have animated this book, it is not my purpose to offer a full apologia in these brief pages. There is one aspect of the conditions of its production that is not always understood about the text: it was produced not merely from the academy, but from convergent social movements of which I have been a part, and within the context of a lesbian and gay community on the east coast of the United States in which I lived for fourteen years prior to the writing of this book. Despite the dislocation of the subject that the text performs, there is a person here: I went to many meetings, bars, and marches and saw many kinds of genders, understood myself to be at the crossroads of some of them, and encountered sexuality at several of its cultural edges. I knew many people who were trying to find



their way in the midst of a significant movement for sexual recognition and freedom, and felt the exhilaration and frustration that goes along with being a part of that movement both in its hopefulness and internal dissension. At the same time that I was ensconced in the academy, I was also living a life outside those walls, and though *Gender Trouble* is an academic book, it began, for me, with a crossing-over, sitting on Rehoboth Beach, wondering whether I could link the different sides of my life. That I can write in an autobiographical mode does not, I think, relocate this subject that I am, but perhaps it gives the reader a sense of solace that there is someone here (I will suspend for the moment the problem that this someone is given in language).

It has been one of the most gratifying experiences for me that the text continues to move outside the academy to this day. At the same time that the book was taken up by Queer Nation, and some of its reflections on the theatricality of queer self-presentation resonated with the tactics of Act Up, it was among the materials that also helped to prompt members of the American Psychoanalytic Association and the American Psychological Association to reassess some of their current doxa homosexuality. The questions of performative gender were appropriated in different ways in the visual arts, at Whitney exhibitions, and at the Otis School for the Arts in Los Angeles, among others. Some of its formulations on the subject of "women" and the relation between sexuality and gender also made its way into feminist jurisprudence and antidiscrimination legal scholarship in the work of Vicki Schultz, Katherine Franke, and Mary Jo Frug.

In turn, I have been compelled to revise some of my positions in *Gender Trouble* by virtue of my own political engagements. In the book, I tend to conceive of the claim of "universality" in exclusive negative and exclusionary terms. However, I came to see the term has important strategic use precisely as a non-substantial and open-ended category as I worked with an extraordinary group of activists first as a board member and then as board chair of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (1994–7), an organization that represents sexual minorities on a broad range of human rights issues. There I came to understand how the assertion of universality can be proleptic and performative, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet met. Thus, I arrived at a second view of universality in which it is defined as a future-oriented labor of cultural translation.<sup>13</sup> More recently, I have been compelled to relate my work to political theory and, once again, to the concept of universality in a co-authored book that I am writing with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek on the theory of hegemony and its implications for a theoretically activist Left (to be published by Verso in 2000).

Another practical dimension of my thinking has taken place in relationship to psychoanalysis as both a scholarly and clinical enterprise. I am currently working with a group of progressive psychoanalytic therapists on a new journal, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, that seeks to bring clinical and scholarly work into productive dialogue on questions of sexuality, gender, and culture.

Both critics and friends of *Gender Trouble* have drawn attention to the difficulty of its style. It is no doubt strange, and maddening to some, to find a book that is not easily

consumed to be “popular” according to academic standards. The surprise over this is perhaps attributable to the way we underestimate the reading public, its capacity and desire for reading complicated and challenging texts, when the complication is not gratuitous, when the challenge is in the service of calling taken-for-granted truths into question, when the taken for grantedness of those truths is, indeed, oppressive.

I think that style is a complicated terrain, and not one that we unilaterally choose or control with the purposes we consciously intend. Fredric Jameson made this clear in his early book on Sartre. Certainly, one can practice styles, but the styles that become available to you are not entirely a matter of choice. Moreover, neither grammar nor style are politically neutral. Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself. As Drucilla Cornell, in the tradition of Adorno, reminds me: there is nothing radical about common sense. It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views, given the constraints that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself. But formulations that twist grammar or that implicitly call into question the subject-verb requirements of propositional sense are clearly irritating for some. They produce more work for their readers, and sometimes their readers are offended by such demands. Are those who are offended making a legitimate request for “plain speaking” or does their complaint emerge from a consumer expectation of intellectual life? Is there, perhaps, a value to be derived from such experiences of linguistic difficulty? If gender itself is naturalized through grammatical norms, as Monique Wittig has argued, then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given.

The demand for lucidity forgets the ruses that motor the ostensibly “clear” view. Avital Ronell recalls the moment in which Nixon looked into the eyes of the nation and said, “let me make one thing perfectly clear” and then proceeded to lie. What travels under the sign of “clarity,” and what would be the price of failing to deploy a certain critical suspicion when the arrival of lucidity is announced? Who devises the protocols of “clarity” and whose interests do they serve? What is foreclosed by the insistence on parochial standards of transparency as requisite for all communication? What does “transparency” keep obscure?

I grew up understanding something of the violence of gender norms: an uncle incarcerated for his anatomically anomalous body, deprived of family and friends, living out his days in an “institute” in the Kansas prairies; gay cousins forced to leave their homes because of their sexuality, real and imagined; my own tempestuous coming out at the age of 16; and a subsequent adult landscape of lost jobs, lovers, and homes. All of this subjected me to strong and scarring condemnation but, luckily, did not prevent me from pursuing pleasure and insisting on a legitimating recognition for my sexual life. It was difficult to bring this violence into view precisely because gender was so taken for granted at the same time that it was violently policed. It was assumed either to be a natural manifestation of sex or a cultural constant that no human agency could hope to revise. I also came to understand something of the violence of the foreclosed life, the one

that does not get named as “living,” the one whose incarceration implies a suspension of life, or a sustained death sentence. The dogged effort to “denaturalize” gender in this text emerges, I think, from a strong desire both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality that are informed by ordinary and academic discourses on sexuality. The writing of this denaturalization was not done simply out of a desire to play with language or prescribe theatrical antics in the place of “real” politics, as some critics have conjectured (as if theatre and politics are always distinct). It was done from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such. What would the world have to be like for my uncle to live in the company of family, friends, or extended kinship of some other kind? How must we rethink the ideal morphological constraints upon the human such that those who fail to approximate the norm are not condemned to a death within life?<sup>14</sup>

Some readers have asked whether *Gender Trouble* seeks to expand the realm of gender possibilities for a reason. They ask, for what purpose are such new configurations of gender devised, and how ought we to judge among them? The question often involves a prior premise, namely, that the text does not address the normative or prescriptive dimension of feminist thought. “Normative” clearly has at least two meanings in this critical encounter, since the word is one I use often, mainly to describe the mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals. I usually use “normative” in a way that is synonymous with “pertaining to the norms that govern gender.” But the term “normative” also pertains to ethical justification, how it is established, and what concrete consequences proceed therefrom. One critical question posed of *Gender Trouble* has been: how do we proceed to make judgments on how gender is to be lived on the basis of the theoretical descriptions offered here? It is not possible to oppose the “normative” forms of gender without at the same time subscribing to a certain normative view of how the gendered world ought to be. I want to suggest, however, that the positive normative vision of this text, such as it is, does not and cannot take the form of a prescription: “subvert gender in the way that I say, and life will be good.”

Those who make such prescriptions or who are willing to decide between subversive and unsubversive expressions of gender, base their judgments on a description. Gender appears in this or that form, and then a normative judgment is made about those appearances and on the basis of what appears. But what conditions the domain of appearance for gender itself? We may be tempted to make the following distinction: a *descriptive* account of gender includes considerations of what makes gender intelligible, an inquiry into its conditions of possibility, whereas a *normative* account seeks to answer the question of which expressions of gender are acceptable, and which are not, supplying persuasive reasons to distinguish between such expressions in this way. The question, however, of what qualifies as “gender” is itself already a question that attests to a pervasively normative operation of power, a fugitive operation of “what will be the case” under the rubric of “what is the case.” Thus, the very description of the field of gender is no sense prior to, or separable from, the question of its normative operation.

I am not interested in delivering judgments on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive. Not only do I believe that such judgments cannot be made out of context, but that they cannot be made in ways that endure through time (“contexts” are themselves posited unities that undergo temporal change and expose their essential disunity). Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where “subversion” carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to. So what is at stake in using the term at all?

What continues to concern me most is the following kinds of questions: what will and will not constitute an intelligible life, and how do presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as the “human” and the “livable”? In other words, how do normative gender presumptions work to delimit the very field of description that we have for the human? What is the means by which we come to see this delimiting power, and what are the means by which we transform it?

The discussion of drag that *Gender Trouble* offers to explain the constructed and performative dimension of gender is not precisely *an example* of subversion. It would be a mistake to take it as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency. The point is rather different. If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the “reality” of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks “reality,” and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion. But what is the sense of “gender reality” that founds this perception in this way? Perhaps we think we know what the anatomy of the person is (sometimes we do not, and we certainly have not appreciated the variation that exists at the level of anatomical description). Or we derive that knowledge from the clothes that the person wears, or how the clothes are worn. This is naturalized knowledge, even though it is based on a series of cultural inferences, some of which are highly erroneous. Indeed, if we shift the example from drag to transsexuality, then it is no longer possible to derive a judgment about stable anatomy from the clothes that cover and articulate the body. That body may be preoperative, transitional, or postoperative; even “seeing” the body may not answer the question: for *what are the categories through which one sees?* The moment in which one’s staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question.

When such categories come into question, the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be “real,” what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. Call it subversive or call it something else. Although this insight does not in itself constitute a

political revolution, no political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one's notion of the possible and the real. And sometimes this shift comes as a result of certain kinds of practices that precede their explicit theorization, and which prompt a rethinking of our basic categories: what is gender, how is it produced and reproduced, what are its possibilities? At this point, the sedimented and reified field of gender "reality" is understood as one that might be made differently and, indeed, less violently.

The point of this text is not to celebrate drag as the expression of a true and model gender (even as it is important to resist the belittling of drag that sometimes takes place), but to show that the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality. To the extent the gender norms (ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies, ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity, many of which are underwritten by racial codes of purity and taboos against miscegenation) establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be "real," they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression. If there is a positive normative task in *Gender Trouble*, it is to insist upon the extension of this legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal, and unintelligible. Drag is an example that is meant to establish that "reality" is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be. The purpose of the example is to expose the tenuousness of gender "reality" in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms.

In this text as elsewhere I have tried to understand what political agency might be, given that it cannot be isolated from the dynamics of power from which it is wrought. The iterability of performativity is a theory of agency, one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility. This text does not sufficiently explain performativity in terms of its social, psychic, corporeal, and temporal dimensions. In some ways, the continuing work of that clarification, in response to numerous excellent criticisms, guides most of my subsequent publications.

Other concerns have emerged over this text in the last decade, and I have sought to answer them through various publications. On the status of the materiality of the body, I have offered a reconsideration and revision of my views in *Bodies that Matter*. On the question of the necessity of the category of "women" for feminist analysis, I have revised and expanded my views in "Contingent Foundations" to be found in the volume I coedited with Joan W. Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (Routledge, 1993) and in the collectively authored *Feminist Contentions* (Routledge, 1995).

I do not believe that poststructuralism entails the death of autobiographical writing, but it does draw attention to the difficulty of the "I" to express itself through the language that is available to it. For this "I" that you read is in part a consequence of the grammar that governs the availability of persons in language. I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this "I" possible. This is the bind of self-expression, as I understand it. What it means is that you never receive me apart from the grammar that establishes my availability to you. If I treat that grammar as pellucid, then I fail to call attention precisely to that sphere of

language that establishes and disestablishes intelligibility, and that would be precisely to thwart my own project as I have described it to you here. I am not trying to be difficult, but only to draw attention to a difficulty without which no "I" can appear.

This difficulty takes on a specific dimension when approached from a psychoanalytic perspective. In my efforts to understand the opacity of the "I" in language, I have turned increasingly to psychoanalysis since the publication of *Gender Trouble*. The usual effort to polarize the theory of the psyche from the theory of power seems to me to be counter-productive, for part of what is so oppressive about social forms of gender is the psychic difficulties they produce. I sought to consider the ways in which Foucault and psychoanalysis might be thought together in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, 1997). I have also made use of psychoanalysis to curb the occasional voluntarism of my view of performativity without thereby undermining a more general theory of agency. *Gender Trouble* sometimes reads as if gender is simply a self-invention or that the psychic meaning of a gendered presentation might be read directly off its surface. Both of those postulates have had to be refined over time. Moreover, my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, and that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions. In *Excitable Speech*, I sought to show that the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions. If one wonders how a linguistic theory of the speech act relates to bodily gestures, one need only consider that speech itself is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences. Thus speech belongs exclusively neither to corporeal presentation nor to language, and its status as word and deed is necessarily ambiguous. This ambiguity has consequences for the practice of coming out, for the insurrectionary power of the speech act, for language as a condition of both bodily seduction and the threat of injury.

If I were to rewrite this book under present circumstances, I would include a discussion of transgender and intersexuality, the way that ideal gender dimorphism works in both sorts of discourses, the different relations to surgical intervention that these related concerns sustain. I would also include a discussion on racialized sexuality and, in particular, how taboos against miscegenation (and the romanticization of cross-racial sexual exchange) are essential to the naturalized and denaturalized forms that gender takes. I continue to hope for a coalition of sexual minorities that will transcend the simple categories of identity, that will refuse the erasure of bisexuality, that will counter and dissipate the violence imposed by restrictive bodily norms. I would hope that such a coalition would be based on the irreducible complexity of sexuality and its implication in various dynamics of discursive and institutional power, and that no one will be too quick to reduce power to hierarchy and to refuse its productive political dimensions. Even as I think that gaining recognition for one's status as a sexual minority is a difficult task within reigning discourses of law, politics, and language, I continue to consider it a necessity for survival. The mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of politicization always remain threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an

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instrument of the power one opposes. That is no reason not to use, and be used, by identity. There is no political position purified of power, and perhaps that impurity is what produces agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes. Those who are deemed "unreal" nevertheless lay hold of the real, a laying hold that happens in concert, and a vital instability is produced by that performative surprise. This book is written then as part of the cultural life of a collective struggle that has had, and will continue to have, some success in increasing the possibilities for a livable life for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins.<sup>15</sup>

Judith Butler  
Berkeley, California  
June, 1999

## Notes

### PREFACE (1999)

1. At this printing, there are French publishers considering the translation of this work, but only because Didier Eribon and others have inserted the arguments of the text into current French political debates on the legal ratification of same-sex partnerships.
2. I have written two brief pieces on this issue: "Afterword" for *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, ed. Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1998), and another Afterword for "Transgender in Latin America
3. Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 6–7.
4. Unfortunately, *Gender Trouble* preceded the publication of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's monumental *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) by some months, and my arguments here were not able to benefit from her nuanced discussion of gender and sexuality in the first chapter of that book.
5. Jonathan Goldberg persuaded me of this point.
6. For a more or less complete bibliography of my publications and citations of my work, see the excellent work of Eddie Yeghiayan at the University of California at Irvine Library: <http://sun3.lib.uci.edu/~scctr/Wellek/index.html>.
7. I am especially indebted to Bidy Martin, Eve Sedgwick, Slavoj Žižek, Wendy Brown, Saidiya Hartman, Mandy Merck, Lynne Layton, Timothy Kaufmann-Osborne, Jessica Benjamin, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, Diana Fuss, Jay Presser, Lisa Duggan, and Elizabeth Grosz for their insightful criticisms of the theory of performativity.
8. This notion of the ritual dimension of performativity is allied with the notion of the habitus in Pierre Bourdieu's work, something which I only came to realize after the fact of writing this text. For my belated effort to account for this resonance, see the final chapter of *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
9. Jacqueline Rose usefully pointed out to me the disjunction between the earlier and later parts of this text. The earlier parts interrogate the melancholy construction of gender, but the later seem to forget the psychoanalytic beginnings. Perhaps this accounts for some of the "mania" of the final chapter, a state defined by Freud as part of the disavowal of loss that is melancholia. *Gender Trouble* in its closing pages seems to forget or disavow the loss it has just articulated.
10. See *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993) as well as an able and interesting critique that relates some of the questions raised there to contemporary science studies by Karen Barad, "Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality," *differences*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 87–126.
11. Saidiya Hartman, Lisa Lowe, and Dorinne Kondo are scholars whose work has influenced my own. Much of the current scholarship on "passing" has also taken up this question. My own essay on Nella Larsen's "Passing" in *Bodies That Matter* sought to address the question in a preliminary way. Of course, Homi Bhabha's work on the mimetic splitting of the postcolonial subject is close to my own in several ways: not only the appropriation of the colonial "voice" by the colonized, but the split condition of identification are crucial to a notion of performativity that emphasizes the way minority identities are produced and riven at the same time under conditions of domination.
12. The work of Kobena Mercer, Kendall Thomas, and Hortense Spillers has been extremely useful to my post-*Gender Trouble* thinking on this subject. I also hope to publish an essay on Frantz Fanon soon engaging questions of mimesis and hyperbole in his *Black Skin, White Masks*. I am grateful to Greg Thomas, who has recently completed his dissertation in rhetoric at Berkeley, on racialized sexualities in the U.S., for provoking and enriching my understanding of this crucial intersection.
13. I have offered reflections on universality in subsequent writings, most prominently in [chapter 2](#) of *Excitable Speech*.
14. See the important publications of the Intersex Society of North America (including the publications of Cheryl Chase) which has, more than any other organization, brought to public attention the severe and



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violent gender policing done to infants and children born with gender anomalous bodies. For more information, contact them at <http://www.isna.org>.

15. I thank Wendy Brown, Joan W. Scott, Alexandra Chasin, Frances Bartkowski, Janet Halley, Michel Feher, Homi Bhabha, Drucilla Cornell, Denise Riley, Elizabeth Weed, Kaja Silverman, Ann Pellegrini, William Connolly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ernesto Laclau, Eduardo Cadava, Florence Dore, David Kazanjian, David End, and Dina Al-kassim for their support and friendship during the Spring of 1999 when this preface was written.