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## On Judith Butler and Performativity

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“Science” and “naturalness” are discursive constructs and, although it might seem strange to refute the authority of “science” after quoting apparently “scientific” data, the point Butler is making is clear: the body is not a “mute facticity” (GT: 129), i.e. a fact of nature, but like gender it is produced by discourses such as the ones Butler has been analyzing. As with gender, to suggest that there is no body prior to cultural inscription will lead Butler to argue that sex as well as gender can be performatively reinscribed in ways that accentuate its factitiousness (i.e. its constructedness) rather than its facticity (i.e. the fact of its existence). Such reinscriptions, or re-citations as Butler will call them in *Bodies That Matter*, constitute the subject’s agency within the law, in other words, the possibilities of subverting the law against itself. Agency is an important concept for Butler, since it signifies the opportunities for subverting the law against itself to radical, political ends.

### PERFORMATIVITY

Butler has collapsed the sex/gender distinction in order to argue that there is no sex that is not always already gender. All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no “natural body” that pre-exists its cultural inscription. This seems to point towards the conclusion that gender is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a “doing” rather than a “being” (GT: 25). Butler elaborates this idea in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is

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successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.

Gender is not just a process, but it is a particular type of process, “a set of repeated acts *within a highly rigid regulatory frame*” as Butler puts it. I have italicized that last phrase in order to stress that, as with the wardrobe analogy that I introduce later in this chapter, Butler is *not* suggesting that the subject is free to choose which gender she or he is going to enact. “The script,” if you like, is always already determined within this regulatory frame, and the subject has a limited number of “costumes” from which to make a constrained choice of gender style.

The idea of performativity is introduced in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* when Butler states that “gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (GT: 25). She then quotes the claim Nietzsche makes in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, acting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything” (1887: 29), before adding her own gendered corollary to his formulation: “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (GT: 25).

This is a statement that has confused many people. How can there be a performance without a performer, an act without an actor? Actually, Butler is not claiming that gender is a performance, and she distinguishes between performance and performativity (although at times in *Gender Trouble* the two terms seem to slide into one another). In an interview given in 1993 she emphasizes the importance of this distinction, arguing that, whereas

performance presupposes a preexisting subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject (GP: 33). In this interview Butler also explicitly connects her use of the concept “performativity” to the speech act theory of J. L. Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words* (1955) and Derrida’s deconstruction of Austin’s ideas in his essay “Signature Event Context” (1972). Both of these texts are discussed in detail in Chapter 4 of *Judith Butler*, where I look at Butler’s theorizations of language, but here it should be noted that, although neither Austin nor Derrida is in evidence in *Gender Trouble*, Butler implicitly draws from their linguistic theories in her formulations of gender identity.

How is linguistic performativity connected to gender? Towards the beginning of *Gender Trouble* Butler states that “[w]ithin the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (GT: 24–5). Gender is an act that brings into being what it names: in this context, a “masculine” man or a “feminine” woman. Gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language. If you like, it is not that an identity “does” discourse or language, but the other way around—language and discourse “do” gender. There is no “I” outside language since identity is a signifying practice, and culturally intelligible subjects are the effects rather than the causes of discourses that conceal their workings (GT: 145). It is in this sense that gender identity is performative.

At this point, we might return to the wardrobe analogy I explored in an earlier chapter of *Judith Butler* (p. 50), where I argued that one’s gender is performatively constituted in the same way that one’s choice of clothes is curtailed, perhaps even predetermined, by the society, context, economy, etc. within which one is situated. Readers familiar with Daphne du Maurier’s novel *Rebecca* (1938) will remember that the nameless narrator shocks her

husband by turning up at a party in an identical dress to that worn by his dead wife on a similar occasion. In preparation for the party, the narrator, assisted by the malign Mrs. Danvers, believes that she is choosing her costume and thereby creating herself, whereas it turns out that Mrs. Danvers is in fact recreating the narrator as Rebecca. If Mrs. Danvers is taken to exemplify authority or power here, *Rebecca* may provide an example of the way in which identities, far from being chosen by an individual agent, precede and constitute those “agents” or subjects (just as Rebecca literally precedes the narrator).

### SURFACE/DEPTH

Butler’s argument that there is no identity outside language leads her to reject the commonly accepted distinction between surface and depth, the Cartesian dualism between body and soul. In the third chapter of *Gender Trouble* she draws from Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish*, in which he challenges “the doctrine of internalization,” the theory that subjects are formed by internalizing disciplinary structures. Foucault replaces this with “the model of inscription”: as Butler describes it, this is the idea that “[the] law is not literally internalized, but incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body” (GT: 134–5). Because there is no “interior” to gender “the law” cannot be internalized, but is written on the body in what Butler calls “the corporeal stylization of gender, the fantasied [*sic*] and fantastic figuration of the body” (GT: 135). Butler repeatedly refutes the idea of a pre-linguistic inner core or essence by claiming that gender acts are not performed by the subject, but they performatively constitute a subject that is the effect of discourse rather than the cause of it: “that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality,” she writes (GT: 136; my

emphasis). Once again we return to the notion that there is no doer behind the deed, no volitional agent that knowingly “does” its gender, since the gendered body is inseparable from the acts that constitute it. All the same, in the account of parody and drag that follows this description it does at times sound as though there *is* an actor or a “doer” behind the deed, and Butler later admits that in *Gender Trouble* she “waffled” between describing gender in terms of linguistic performativity and characterizing it as straightforward theatre. Her theories are clarified in *Bodies That Matter* where Butler emphasizes the Derridean and Austinian underpinnings of performativity that are as yet only implicit in *Gender Trouble*.

### PARODY AND DRAG

“If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity,” Butler writes in the third chapter of *Gender Trouble* (GT: 136). In that case, it must be possible to “act” that gender in ways which will draw attention to the constructedness of heterosexual identities that may have a vested interest in presenting themselves as “essential” and “natural,” so that it would be true to say that all gender is a form of parody, but that some gender performances are more parodic than others. Indeed, by highlighting the disjunction between the body of the performer and the gender that is being performed, parodic performances such as drag effectively reveal the imitative nature of *all* gender identities. “*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency,*” Butler claims; “part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender” (GT: 137–8; her emphasis).

Gender is a “corporeal style,” an act (or a sequence of acts), a “strategy” which has cultural survival as its end, since those who do not “do” their gender correctly are punished by society (GT: 139–40); it is a repetition, a copy of a copy and, crucially, the gender parody Butler describes does not presuppose the existence of an original, since it is the very notion of an original that is being parodied (GT: 138). Gender performatives that do not try to conceal their genealogy, indeed, that go out of their way to accentuate it, displace heterocentric assumptions by revealing that heterosexual identities are as constructed and “unoriginal” as the imitations of them.

Gender does not happen once and for all when we are born, but is a sequence of repeated acts that harden into the appearance of something that’s been there all along. If gender is “a regulated process of repetition” taking place in language, then it will be possible to repeat one’s gender differently, as drag artists do (and you might also recall my wardrobe analogy—the ripped clothes and the sequins representing my attempts to “do” my gender in subversive and unexpected ways). As I argued previously, you cannot go out and acquire a whole new gender wardrobe for yourself, since, as Butler puts it, “[t]here is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (GT: 145). So you have to make do with the “tools,” or in my example, the “clothes” that you already have, radically modifying them in ways which will reveal the “unnatural” nature of gender.

There are two problems with this formulation: one is that the *manner* of taking up the tool will be determined as well as enabled by the tool itself—in other words, subversion and agency are conditioned, if not determined, by discourses that cannot be evaded. This leads to the second problem, which is that, if subversion itself is conditioned and constrained by discourse, then how can we tell that it is subversion at all? What is the difference between

subversive parody and the sort of “ordinary” parody that Butler claims everyone is unwittingly engaged in anyway? All gender is parodic, but Butler warns that “[p]arody by itself is not subversive,” and she poses the important question as to which performances effect the various destabilizations of gender and sex she describes, and where those performances take place (GT: 139). There are some forms of drag that are definitely *not* subversive, but serve only to reinforce existing heterosexual power structures—in *Bodies*, Butler cites Dustin Hoffman’s performance in *Tootsie* as an example of what she calls “high het entertainment,” and we might also add the more recent film *Mrs. Doubtfire* in which Robin Williams gives a cross-dressed performance as a nanny. Neither of these drag performances are subversive, since they serve to reinforce existing distinctions between “male” and “female,” “masculine” and “feminine,” “gay” and “straight.”

The question as to what constitutes “subversive,” as opposed to ordinary everyday gender parody, is left open in the conclusion to *Gender Trouble*, “From Parody to Politics,” where Butler asserts that it *is* possible to disrupt what are taken to be the foundations of gender, anticipating *what* such parodic repetitions will achieve, without suggesting exactly *how* this can take place. Butler’s claim on the penultimate page of *Gender Trouble* that “[t]he task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (GT: 148) presents a similar problem: she has already asserted that to describe identity as an effect is not to imply that identity is “fatally determined” or “fully artificial and arbitrary,” and yet at times it sounds as though the subject she describes is in fact trapped within a discourse it has no power to evade or to alter. In which case, “how to repeat” will already be determined in advance, and what looks like agency is merely yet another effect of the law disguised as something different.

All the same, this is certainly not a view Butler expresses, and she seems optimistic about the possibilities of denaturalizing, proliferating and unfixing identities in order to reveal the constructed nature of heterosexuality. A proliferation of identities will reveal the ontological possibilities that are currently restricted by foundationalist models of identity (i.e. those theories which assume that identity is simply *there* and fixed and final). This is not, then, “the death of the subject,” or if it is, it is the theoretical death of an old, fixed subject, and the birth of a new, constructed one characterized by subversive possibility and agency. “Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency,” Butler affirms (GT: 147; see also CF: 15), and this leads her to refute another assumption popular among critics who are hostile to so-called “postmodern” formulations of identity: “[t]he deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated” (GT: 148). Identity is intrinsically political, while construction and deconstruction (note that they are not antithetical) are the necessary—in fact the *only*—scenes of agency. Subversion must take place from within existing discourse, since that is all there is.

However, a number of important questions remain. We have already encountered a potential difficulty in the attempt to differentiate between subversive and ordinary parody, and we still have not answered the question as to what or who exactly is “doing” the parodying. Indeed, if there is no pre-discursive subject, is it possible to talk in terms of parody and agency at all, since both might seem to presuppose an “I”, a doer behind the deed? How helpful is the notion of parodic gender anyway? Does it really reveal the lack of an original that is being imitated, or does it merely draw attention to the factitiousness of the drag artist? Some of these questions and criticisms are dealt with in the next section.

### THE TROUBLE WITH GENDER TROUBLE

The fact that Butler’s description of gender identity has raised so many questions is a testament to its force, and at least some of *Gender Trouble’s* importance lies in the debates it has generated amongst philosophers, feminists, sociologists and theorists of gender, sex and identity, who continue to worry over the meaning of “performativity,” whether it enables or forecloses agency, and whether Butler does indeed sound the death knell of the subject. In a written exchange with Butler, which took place in 1991 and was published in 1995 as *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, the political philosopher Seyla Benhabib asserts that feminist appropriations of Nietzsche, which Benhabib dubs “the ‘death of the subject’ thesis,” can only lead to self-incoherence. If there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, asks Benhabib, then how can women change the “expressions” (by which she apparently means “acts”) by which they are constituted? “If we are no more than the sum total of the gendered expressions we perform, is there ever any chance to stop the performance for a while, to pull the curtain down, and let it rise only if one can have a say in the production of the play itself?” (Benhabib et al. 1995: 21). Butler claims that the Self is a masquerading performer, writes Benhabib, and

we are now asked to believe that there is no self behind the mask. Given how fragile and tenuous women’s sense of selfhood is in many cases, how much of a hit and miss affair their struggles for autonomy are, this reduction of female agency to “a doing without the doer” at best appears to me to be making a virtue out of necessity. (Benhabib et al. 1995: 22)

The claim that the subject is necessary, if only as a fiction, has been made by other theorists, who are also likely to collapse “performativity” into “performance.” Indeed, this

elision leads Benhabib to assume that there is a subjective entity lurking behind “the curtain”—a notion that we know Butler refutes. Butler replies to Benhabib’s (sometimes literal) misreadings in her essay “For a Careful Reading,” which is also included in *Feminist Contentions*, where she corrects the reduction of performativity to theatrical performance.

Two sociologists, John Hood Williams and Wendy Cealy Harrison, also question Butler’s assertion that there is no doer behind the deed, although their critique is based on a clearer understanding of performativity than Benhabib’s. Although they think it is helpful to deconstruct the idea of the ontological status of gender, they wonder whether a new ontology is founded on the equally foundationalist conception of gender performativity (Hood Williams and Cealy Harrison 1998: 75, 88). Feminist critic Toril Moi similarly objects that Butler has instated “power” as her “god” (1999: 47), and this does indeed raise the question as to whether one essential subject (stable, coherently sexed and gendered) has merely been replaced by another (unstable, performative, contingent). Furthermore, we might consider the ways in which the characterization of power as proliferating and self-subverting draws attention away from its oppressive and violent nature, a point that is made by the feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis in her book, *Technologies of Gender* (though not in relation to Butler) (1987: 18). We have also seen that Butler’s theories of discursively constructed melancholic gender identities might imply that the subject she describes is, like the Lacanian subject, negatively characterized by lack, loss and its enthrallment to a pervasive and unavoidable law.

Hood Williams and Cealy Harrison also question the theoretical wisdom of combining speech act theory and psychoanalytic theory, since they argue that there is nothing citational about psychoanalytic accounts of identity (1998: 90). They find the assertion that there is no “I” behind discourse curious for a theorist

who is so interested in psychoanalysis, as psychoanalysis is centrally concerned with the “I” and the process of its constitution (Hood Williams and Cealy Harrison 1998: 83). Furthermore, they describe Butler’s reading of Freud as “idiosyncratic” (1998: 85), while the theorist Jay Prosser also questions the accuracy of Butler’s analysis of Freud, particularly a mis-citation of a key passage from Freud’s *The Ego and the Id*, the theory that the body is a fantasized surface and a projection of the ego. Prosser’s book is an “attempt to read individual corporeal experience back into theories of ‘the’ body” (1998: 7), so for him the question as to whether the body is a phantasmatic surface or a pre-existing depth is crucial. Claiming that formulations of transgendered identity are central to queer studies (and the transgendered individual is indeed important for both Butler and Foucault), Prosser rejects the notion that gender is performative, pointing out that “there are transgendered trajectories, in particular *transsexual* trajectories, that aspire to that which this scheme [i.e. performativity] devalues. Namely, there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to *be*” (1998: 32).

Butler addresses some of these criticisms in the Preface to the 1999 anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*, where she acknowledges that the first edition of the book contains certain omissions, in particular, transgender, intersexuality, “[r]acialized sexualities” and taboos against miscegenation. Butler also accepts that her explanation of performativity is insufficient, and she admits that sometimes she does not distinguish between linguistic and theatrical performativity which she now regards as related (GTII: xxvi, xxv).

Butler’s next book, *Bodies That Matter*, continues in similar interrogative mode, answering some of the questions arising from *Gender Trouble* and posing new and equally “troubling” ones about “the matter” of the body, its signification and its “citation” in discourse.

### PERFORMATIVE BODIES

In one section of *Judith Butler*, we encounter Butler's glancing reference to the performativity of the phallus and look in detail at her account of a discursively constructed body which cannot be separated from the linguistic acts that name it and constitute it. Here we will turn to a statement Butler makes in the Introduction to *Bodies*, that, when it comes to the matter of bodies, the *constative claim is always to some degree performative* (BTM: 11). Remember the interpellative call of the policeman who hails the man in the street, or the doctor or nurse who exclaims "It's a girl!" when the image of a foetus is seen on a scan. Earlier, I placed Butler's formulations of performative identities in the context of J. L. Austin's linguistic theories. In *Bodies That Matter* Butler once again draws from these lectures on linguistics, *How To Do Things With Words*. Austin distinguishes between two types of utterances, those that describe or report on something, and those that, in saying, actually perform what is being said. An example of the first, which Austin calls *constative utterances*, might be the statement, "It's a sunny day," or "I went shopping" (Austin also calls these *perlocutionary acts*); by saying "I went shopping," I am not doing it, I am merely reporting an occurrence. On the other hand, if I am a heterosexual man standing in front of a registrar in a Register Office and I utter the words "I do" in answer to the question, "Do you take this woman to be your wife?," then I am actually performing the action by making the utterance: statements like these are called *performative utterances* or *illocutionary acts*. "To name the ship *is* to say (in the appropriate circumstances) the words 'I name &c.' When I say, before the registrar or altar &c., 'I do', I am not reporting on a marriage, I am indulging in it" (Austin 1955: 6).

To claim, as Butler does, that sex is always ("to some degree") performative is to claim that bodies are never merely described, they

are always constituted in the act of description. When the doctor or nurse declares "It's a girl/boy!", they are not simply reporting on what they see (this would be a constative utterance), they are actually assigning a sex and a gender to a body that can have no existence outside discourse. In other words, the statement "It's a girl/boy!" is performative. Butler returns to the birth/ultrasound scene in the final chapter to *Bodies*, "Critically Queer," where, as before, she argues that discourse precedes and constitutes the "I," i.e. the subject:

To the extent that the naming of the "girl" is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain "girling" is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a "girl", however, who is compelled to "cite" the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. (BTM: 232)

"It's a girl!" is not a statement of fact but an interpellation that initiates the process of "girling," a process based on perceived and *imposed* differences between men and women, differences that are far from "natural." To demonstrate the performative operations of interpellation, Butler cites a cartoon strip in which an infant is assigned its place in the sex-gender system with the exclamation "It's a lesbian!" "Far from an essentialist joke, the queer appropriation of the performative mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law *and its expropriability*," writes Butler (BTM: 232; her emphasis). We will return to expropriability and citation shortly; here the point to note is that, since sexual and gendered differences are performatively installed by and in discourse, it would be possible to designate or confer identity on the

basis of an alternative set of discursively constituted attributes. Clearly, to announce that an infant is a lesbian is not a neutral act of description but a performative statement that interpellates the infant as such. "It's a girl!" functions in exactly the same way: it is a performative utterance that henceforth compels the "girl" to cite both sexual and gendered norms in order to qualify for subjecthood within the heterosexual matrix that "hails" her.

"It is in terms of a norm that compels a certain 'citation' in order for a viable subject to be produced that the notion of gender performativity calls to be rethought," Butler claims (BTM: 232). The term "citation," highlighted in Butler's statement by its quotation marks, has been used throughout *Bodies* in a specifically Derridean sense that both differentiates it from, and aligns it with, performativity. The citation of sex and gender norms will be dealt with in the next section.

### CITATIONAL SIGNS

In the previous section I quoted Butler's assertion that femininity is not a choice but the forcible citation of a norm. What exactly does it mean to cite sex or gender, and how does Butler use this term in *Bodies That Matter*? The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of the verb "to cite" reveals interesting etymological links with interpellation (although these are not connections Butler acknowledges). The word comes from the Latin *citare*, to set in motion or to call, and its meanings are listed as: 1) to summon officially to appear in a court of law; 2) to summon or arouse; 3) to quote; 4) to adduce proof; and 5) to call to mind, mention, refer to. The third, fourth and fifth dictionary definitions are closest to Butler's use of the term, but "summoning" could also indicate the theoretical links between citation and interpellation.

Butler uses "citation" in a specifically Derridean sense to describe the ways in which ontological norms are deployed in discourse,

sometimes forcibly and sometimes not. Derrida's essay "Signature Event Context" is a response to Austin's claim that performative utterances are only "successful" if they remain within the constraints of context and authorial intention. According to Austin, in order for a statement to have performative force (in other words, in order for it to enact what it names), it must 1) be uttered by the person designated to do so in an appropriate context; 2) adhere to certain conventions; and 3) take the intention(s) of the utterer into account. For example, if a brain surgeon stands at a church altar facing two people of the same sex and announces "I pronounce you man and wife," the statement will have no performative force in the Austinian sense, since we can assume that the brain surgeon is not ordained and therefore is not the person authorized to marry the pair. Similarly, a priest who whispers "I pronounce you man and wife" to his two teddy bears late at night before going to sleep is not conducting a marriage ceremony, even though he is authorized to do so, but is playing a game or having a fantasy. Clearly, *his* statement will have as little force as the unordained brain surgeon's, since 1) the context is inappropriate; 2) as with same-sex couples, in the UK and the US there is currently no law or convention regulating or permitting the marriage of toys; and 3) it is presumably not the priest's intention to marry his teddy bears to one another.

Austin spends some time attempting to distinguish felicitous from infelicitous performatives. What is important at this stage is that Derrida seizes on the "weakness" Austin discerns in the linguistic sign: after all, Austin would not attempt to differentiate between felicitous and infelicitous performatives if he did not know that statements are liable to be taken out of context and used in ways that their original utterers did not intend. Derrida asserts that what Austin regards as a pitfall or a weakness is in fact a feature of *all* linguistic signs that are vulnerable to appropriation,



reiteration and, to return to the subject of this section, *re-citation*. This is what Derrida calls “the essential iterability of [a] sign” which cannot be contained or enclosed by any context, convention or authorial intention (1972: 93). Rather, Derrida asserts that signs can be transplanted into unforeseen contexts and cited in unexpected ways, an appropriation and relocation that he calls citational grafting: all signs may be placed between quotation marks (“sex,” “race”), cited, grafted, and reiterated in ways that do not conform to their speaker’s or writer’s original intentions and this means that, as Derrida puts it, the possibility of failure is intrinsic and necessary to the sign, indeed it is *constitutive* of the sign (1972: 97, 101–3).

These ideas will be familiar from *Gender Trouble* where, as I noted, Derrida is an implicit rather than a stated presence, and where failure, citation and re-citation are crucial to Butler’s discussions of subversive gender performatives. In *Bodies*, Butler sees potential for subversion in Derrida’s characterizations of the citational sign, and she now charts a move in her own theory from performativity to citationality, since rethinking performativity through citationality is deemed useful for radical democratic theory (BTM: 191; see also 14). Specifically, Butler asserts that Derrida’s citationality will be useful as a queer strategy of converting the abjection and exclusion of non-sanctioned sexed and gendered identities into political agency.

In the final chapter of *Bodies*, Butler suggests that what she has called “the contentious practices of ‘queerness’” exemplify the political enactment of performativity as citationality (BTM: 21). Butler is referring to subversive practices whereby gender performatives are “cited,” grafted onto other contexts, thereby revealing the citationality and the intrinsic—but necessary and *useful*—failure of all gender performatives. Butler gave examples of these practices in *Gender Trouble*, where she focused on parody and drag as strategies of subversion

and agency. In *Bodies* she returns to drag as an example of what she calls “queer trouble,” and she finds other occasions for “Nietzschean hopefulness” in the iterability and citationality of the sign. We will return to these ways of “making trouble” in the next section but one.

### THE MATTER OF RACE

Can race, like sex, sexuality and gender be cited and re-cited in ways that reveal the vulnerability of the terms of the law to appropriation and subversion? Is race an interpellated performance, and is a racial identity something that is “assumed” rather than something one simply “is”? Would it be possible once again to alter the terms of de Beauvoir’s statement and affirm that “one is not born but rather one becomes black/white”? Or could the word “race” be substituted for “sex” in Butler’s description of *Bodies That Matter* as “a poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialization of sex”? (BTM: 12).

Discussions of race were largely absent from *Gender Trouble*, and in *Bodies* Butler is careful to make the “addition” of considerations of racial identity to her analyses of identity formation (BTM: 18). Accepting that normative heterosexuality is not the only regulatory regime operating in the production of the body, Butler asks what other “regimes of regulatory production contour the materiality of bodies” (BTM: 17), and she asserts that “[t]he symbolic—that register of regulatory ideality—is also and always a racial industry, indeed, [it is] the reiterated practice of *racializing* interpellations” (BTM: 18; original emphasis). Butler rejects models of power that see racial differences as subordinate to sexual difference, and she argues that both racial and heterosexual imperatives are at work in reproductive and sexing practices.

Interpellations do not just “call us” into sex, sexuality and gender, but they are also

“racializing” imperatives that institute racial difference as a condition of subjecthood. Sexual and racial differences are not autonomous or discrete axes of power (BTM: 116–17) and Butler repeatedly emphasizes that sex and gender are in no way prior to race. “What appear within such an enumerative framework as separable categories are, rather, the conditions of articulation *for* each other,” she states; “How is race lived in the modality of sexuality? How is gender lived in the modality of race? How do colonial and neo-colonial nation-states rehearse gender relations in the consolidation of state power?” (BTM: 117).

These are the questions Butler sets herself, but in spite of this the “matter” of race is not convincingly integrated into her discussions (which is why I am dealing with the question in a separate, penultimate section here). Although she analyzes how sex, sexuality and gender are interpellated, assumed and performatively constituted, there are no parallel discussions of performative race or *how* exactly race is interpellated by what Butler calls “racializing norms.” Moreover, some critics might feel that it is important to preserve the distinction between the “raced” body and the gendered/sexed/sexualized one. Remember the “It’s a lesbian!” joke: there the humor is derived from the fact that sexuality is not visible at birth, whereas by contrast race very often (although certainly not always) is. The African-American theorist Henry Louis Gates Jr. effectively crystallizes this issue when he makes the following statement in his essay “The Master’s Pieces”:

It’s important to remember that “race” is *only* a sociopolitical category, nothing more. At the same time—in terms of its practical performative force—that doesn’t help me when I’m trying to get a taxi on the corner of 125th and Lenox Avenue. (“Please sir, it’s only a metaphor.”) (1992: 37–8)

Gates’ wry observation shows that the visibly “raced” body (black or white) cannot be

theorized in exactly the same way as the sexualized, sexed or gendered body, although this is not to dispute Butler’s assertion that all these vectors of power operate simultaneously and through one another.

It may be significant that Butler’s most extended discussion of race centers on a novella by Nella Larsen, *Passing*, in which one of the protagonists attempts to “pass” for white. Here the body is *not* visibly black, and Clare (the woman who is “passing” for white) is only “outed” (Butler’s term, BTM: 170) when her white husband encounters her among a group of black people. Butler uses *Passing* to confirm her point that race and sexuality are imbricated and implicated, since she discerns an overlapping of the “mute homosexuality” between the two women protagonists and Clare’s “muted” blackness, which, like homosexual desire, attempts to conceal itself (BTM: 175). Moreover, just as heterosexuality requires homosexuality in order to constitute its coherence, so “whiteness” requires “blackness” to offset itself and confirm its racial boundaries. Heterosexuality and whiteness are simultaneously destabilized in *Passing*, as queering—i.e. the desire between the two women—upsets and exposes both racial and sexual passing (BTM: 177). (For a discussion of race and melancholia, see Butler’s interview “On Speech, Race and Melancholia,” 1999). Butler’s analysis of Larsen’s novella similarly “queers” psychoanalytic theory by exposing its assumption of the primacy of sexuality and whiteness. In fact, Butler sees *Passing* as a challenge to psychoanalytic theory, “a theorization of desire, displacement, and jealous rage that has significant implications for rewriting psychoanalytic theory in ways that explicitly come to terms with race” (BTM: 182).

The other analysis of race in *Bodies* occurs in Butler’s discussion of Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning* (BTM: 121–40), a film about drag balls in Harlem that are attended by/performed by African-American or Latino/Latina

“men.” Again, Butler sees the film as exemplifying her assertion that sexual difference does not precede race or class in the constitution of the subject, so that the symbolic is also a racializing set of norms and the subject is produced by racially informed conceptions of “sex” (BTM: 130). Butler’s analyses of *Paris Is Burning* and *Passing* lead her to conclude that the theoretical priority of homosexuality and gender must give way to a more complex mapping of power that places both terms in their specific racial and political contexts (BTM: 240).

Butler herself has been scrupulous in *not* suggesting that any one term takes priority over another, even though the organization of *Bodies* might suggest otherwise—if not the priority of sex over race, at least the separability of the terms. Since race is largely dealt with in discrete chapters (and, for that matter, these chapters are “literary” rather than “theoretical” in their focus), as I noted before, “the matter,” so to speak, remains somewhat at a distance from Butler’s other theoretical discussions. We may be left with questions concerning the relationship between race and the lesbian phallus, or how Butler’s description of “girling” might be applied to race, since neither the lesbian phallus nor interpellation/performativity are specifically discussed in the context of race. All the same, to talk in terms of “racializing norms” is indeed to suggest that race, like gender, sex and sexuality, is constructed rather than natural, assumed in response to the interpellative “call” of discourse and the law, even though Butler is somewhat unspecific as to how exactly this “call to race” takes place.

### QUEER TROUBLE

In spite of the tragic outcome of both texts, Butler highlights the moments of promising instability in *Paris Is Burning* and *Passing*. In Butler’s analysis, *Paris Is Burning* represents the resignification of normative heterosexual kinship (an issue to which Butler will return in

*Antigone’s Claim*), while *Passing* similarly reveals how hegemonic racial and sexual norms may be destabilized by subjects who do not fit neatly in the categories of white heterosexuality. Such norms are far from monolithic or stable, but, as we saw in a previous section, they may be reiterated and cited in ways that undermine heterosexual hegemony. (For an alternative reading of *Paris Is Burning*, see bell hooks’ essay, “Is Paris Burning?” [1996].)

However, if all linguistic signs are citational, citationality in and of itself is not a subversive practice, and it follows that some signs will continue to work in the service of oppressive heterosexuality norms (and this is something we already know from Butler’s description of femininity as “a forcible citation of the norm” [BTM: 232; my emphasis]). Clearly, there are “good” (subversive) citations and “bad” (forced) citations, and the task will be to distinguish between them—which is not always easy as we shall see. Another problem is that discourse and the law operate by concealing their citationality and genealogy, presenting themselves as timeless and singular, while performativity similarly “conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (BTM: 12). Again, it will be necessary to distinguish between those performatives which consolidate the heterosexual norm and those that work to reveal its contingency, instability and citationality.

In a previous example, I described an unordained brain surgeon who conducts a marriage ceremony that, in Austinian terms, will have no performative (or indeed legal) force because it falls outside recognized and sanctioned conventions. Butler, on the other hand, might assert that the utterance of “I pronounce you, etc.” by someone who is not authorized to do so is a subversive political strategy, since it is a recitation of an unstable heterosexual norm that is always vulnerable to appropriation. There are alternative, equally subversive ways of citing heterosexual signs that are *all* vulnerable to appropriation: the

lesbian phallus is one such “recitation,” and Butler gives other examples, some of which are theatrical. As in *Gender Trouble*, parody and drag are modes of queer performance that subversively “allegorize” (to use Butler’s term) heterosexual melancholy, thereby revealing the allegorical nature of *all* sexual identities. Although Butler is careful to distinguish performance from performativity in *Bodies*, she also asserts that theatre provides crucial opportunities for queer politics. “[A]n important set of histories might be told in which the increasing politicization of theatricality for queers is at stake,” she writes. “Such a history might include traditions of cross-dressing, drag balls, street walking, butch-femme spectacles . . . kiss-ins by Queer Nation; drag performance benefits for AIDS” (BTM: 233).

What Butler calls “the increasing theatricalization of political rage in response to the killing inattention of public policy-makers on the issue of AIDS” is epitomized by the appropriation of the term “queer,” an interpellative performative that has been converted from an insult into a linguistic sign of affirmation and resistance (BTM: 233). And yet, although she continues to find subversive potential in the contingency and resignifiability of the sign, Butler is also aware that citation is not necessarily subversive and she points out that certain “denaturalizations” of the heterosexual norm actually enforce heterosexual hegemony (BTM: 231). Such parodies may certainly be “domesticated” so that they lose their subversive potential and function merely as what Butler calls “high het entertainment,” and Butler cites Julie Andrews in *Victor, Victoria*, Dustin Hoffmann in *Tootsie* or Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot* as examples of drag performances that have been produced by the heterosexual entertainment industry for itself (further examples might include Julian Clary and Eddie Izzard) (BTM: 126). Such performances only confirm the boundaries between “straight” and “not straight” identities, providing what Butler calls “a ritualistic release

for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness” (BTM: 126).

As before, it is difficult to disentangle subversive citations and performatives from the power structures they oppose, since subversion is necessarily and inevitably implicated in discourse and the law. However, this constitutes the promise as well as the problematic of performativity, and Butler argues that making use of existing “resources” for subversive ends will require vigilance and hard work. “How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?”, she writes. The problem, of course, is that one *can’t* know this in advance, so that subversive recitation will always involve a certain amount of risk. It is a risk that Butler well understands, as she once again submits her work to the scrutiny of readers who are likely to interpret and deploy her ideas in unforeseen ways. The effects of one’s words are incalculable, since performatives and their significations do not begin or end (BTM: 241). Perhaps it will be appropriate to end with a “citation” of Butler’s concluding acknowledgment of the vulnerability of her own terms to appropriation and redeployment:

it is one of the ambivalent implications of the decentering of the subject to have one’s writing be the site of a necessary and inevitable expropriation. But this yielding of ownership over what one writes has an important set of political corollaries, for the taking up, reforming, deforming of one’s words does open up a difficult future terrain of community, one in which the hope of ever fully recognizing oneself in the terms by which one signifies is sure to be disappointed. This not owning of one’s words is there from the start, however, since speaking is always in some ways the speaking of a stranger through and as oneself, the melancholic reiteration of a language that one never chose, that one does not find as an instrument to be used, but that one is, as it were, used by, expropriated in, as the unstable and continuing condition of the “one”

and the “we”, the ambivalent condition of the power that binds. (BTM: 241–2)

This statement could be interpreted as a gesture of humility or a disclaimer of responsibility on Butler’s part, and there may be contexts in which it is problematic to claim that one does not use language but is, rather, used by it. (“I didn’t write those words! They wrote me.”) Butler returns to the issues of speech acts, linguistic responsibility and the “reach of . . . signifiability” (BTM: 241) when she analyzes hate speech, “obscenity” and censorship in her next book, *Excitable Speech*.

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**Discussion Questions**

1. What, according to Salih's discussion of Judith Butler's work, is gender? What does it mean to say that gender is performative? How is performativity different than performance?
2. What are some of the questions that have been raised about Butler's conception of gender performativity?
3. Do you think that performativity is a useful way of thinking about other social identities, such as race, ethnicity, and class? Why or why not?
4. How well does Weeks' notion of sexual identities as necessary fictions complement Butler's concept of sex and gender as performative?
5. After reading this chapter, what do you believe is possible in regard to subverting hegemonic norms of gender, sex, and sexual identity?