
Analysis Of Judith Butler's Idea Of Gender Performativity

Judith Butler, one of the most influential gender theorists of the modern era, fundamentally altered the landscape of feminist philosophy with her theory on the performativity of gender. Her work, subversive in its own right, effectively disproved the idea of gender and sex as naturally given concepts. However, she also claims that gender is not only “culturally formed”, but acts as “a domain of agency and freedom”. I argue that gender is performed to serve two distinct and often diametrically opposed ends: one, political liberation for the subversive subject, and two, oppressive complicity for the self that lacks agency.

To begin our analysis, it is necessary that we define performativity and discern what it means for gender to be performative. Butler adopts the idea by the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman,” highlighting that gender is constructed through repetition; it is formed entirely of acts, both past and present, which constitute its reality. Performative acts can be broken down into two parts: a thing doing and a thing done. However, Butler’s writing encourages us to think about the ways that the “doing” of gender is not merely a performance that one has control over, as in taking on a role, but also one that is unfolding in accordance with already socially inscribed performatives. I assert that this is both the source of performativity’s liberatory power, and its greatest liability in effecting progressive cultural change. Since gender is constructed differently across time and space, the performing of gender does not focus on completed forms. As Elin Diamond states in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, “each performance marks out a unique temporal space... contain[ing] traces of other now-absent performances, other now disappeared scenes.” Thus, gender always exists as a fluid and contested space where meanings and desires are generated, occluded, and multiply interpreted depending on culture and historical context. This will prove to be important in the following analysis of drag, a performance that does well in destabilizing the gender binary and exposing the fictional construction of gender.

To Butler, drag consists of two functions: firstly, to reveal the possibility of non-judgemental pluralism when it comes to gender expression and identity. Secondly, “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.” If gender is a fluid process of repetition, then it will be possible to repeat one’s gender differently, as drag artists do. For the most subversive performances of drag, there are no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity is revealed as a regulatory fiction just as Butler claims. However, while drag performers have some control over the way that their gender identity is perceived and interpreted by their audience, it is ultimately the audience members who inscribe their notions of gender onto the performers. As a consequence, not all drag performances function as previously stated. As in Robin Williams’

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cross-dressing performance as a nanny in Mrs. Doubtfire, or in Dustin Hoffman's "high het entertainment" in Tootsie, drag can sometimes perpetuate harmful notions of gender identity by amplifying sex-role stereotypes and solidifying those stereotypes for the audience. Drag performances are liberatory only to the extent that they subvert stereotypes, creating a dissonance between the original meanings accorded to gender and the reframing of it.

Additionally, drag is not the only form of theatre that provides possible opportunities for queer liberation. Queer history is enriched with "traditions of cross-dressing, drag balls, street walking, butch-femme spectacles... kiss-ins by Queer Nation, [and] drag performance benefits for AIDS." These performances can all work to disrupt the heteronormative, dichotomous conception of gender by exposing the associated gender norms as fiction. In the case of AIDS activism, performing gender plays an integral role in political change. I also contend that the liberatory power of theatre and performance comes partly from the agency exercised in striking a gendered pose. As Dick Hebdige states, "to strike a pose is to pose a threat... [transforming] the fact of surveillance into the pleasure of being watched." Posing arrests the line of sight and transfixes the one who is looking. The posing individual accepts awareness of being watched and develops that awareness into a decisive pose or attitude that holds the spectator in its power. For LGBTQ+ groups who often experience oppression in the form of erasure and invisibility, exercising self-agency in order to command attention and acknowledgement is a subversive act within itself.

What Butler fails to fully address are the staple issues that black feminism has brought up since its inception. Namely, the ways in which black women are, according to Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, "subjected to multiple forms of exclusion" that intersect to make the performing of black female sexuality particularly complex. To analyze an example in which the performing of gender serves a goal that is non-liberatory and even oppressive, we can turn towards the case of Saartjie Baartman, an African woman who was sexually exploited and trafficked through Europe during the 19th-century. After signing a false contract to exhibit her body as a circus act in Great Britain, Baartman was taken to France and sold to S. Reaux, an animal exhibitor. Reaux put Baartman on public display in and around Paris and was also complicit in her sexual abuse by patrons willing to pay for her defilement. Even after death, her body parts remained on display in a museum in Paris until 1974. On one hand, as in the case of subversive drag performances, stage presentation recuperates and refigures the body as a sign of opposition to institutionalized oppression and dehumanization. On the other hand, as in the case of Saartjie Baartman's exploitation, stage presentation represents and reinscribes those same systems of oppression and degradation by putting her on display before the gaze of an audience. The audience is responsible for inscribing cultural meaning onto Baartman's body, and in doing so, they treat her as both an object and an animal: non-human, and non-woman. Baartman's body and its parts are a site of contestation and ambivalence, complicity and shame.

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In her situation, it is important to ask who has the right to her body: to represent it, to view it, and to possess it. In fact, whose body is it, anyway? Self-agency cannot be exercised by those who do not view themselves as subjects. Baartman herself testified in favor of her 'employers' in court; such a fact reveals the lack of agency that she possessed over her body and her self. Baartman was not performing her own perception of the 'African woman'; rather, she was forced to perform a European image of the African woman, a persona that was both deeply false and utterly depraving. Indeed, gender can only be performed in a liberatory mode if the subject possesses agency over their body and the intended perception of it.

In a modern fashion, the possible failures of gender performativity to liberate marginalized groups are best shown through pornography. With a new trend in sex positivity, it can be argued that adult performers are liberating themselves through the performing of gender, particularly in a sexualized context. I contend that individuals can choose to act within their own agency to perform gender in a way that is liberating to them, but this does not necessarily suggest that the act will be liberating for others who share the same identity. For instance, pornographic films depicting Asian women as docile and submissive contribute to the societal attitude that Asian women are meant to be timid and servile. Lesbian pornography filmed for male audiences contributes to the societal expectation that women are intended to perform for men's pleasure. Although the performers may feel liberated in the sexualized depiction of themselves, and perhaps derive pleasure from it, their performing of gender may contribute to societal attitudes that ultimately act detrimentally upon the groups they represent. Therein lies the difference between liberation and empowerment; a single individual may feel empowered by their performance, but liberation requires a collective effort of exercising agency and performing gender in a way that acts subversively towards established norms.

As Butler writes in the conclusion of *Gender Trouble*, "the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat... to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself." For gender performativity to be applied as a form of political liberation and personal catharsis, we must recognize the limitations of performing gender without acknowledging its ties to agency and social responsibility. Much like the subjects she discusses, Butler's works themselves are part of a process or a becoming which has neither origin nor end; indeed, in which origin and end are rejected as oppressively linear. If Butler's work is the repetition of a process, our understanding of gender performativity is constantly evolving, shifting, and becoming along with it.

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