

Kejt Walsh

Bodies, Power, Performativity

Judith Butler's work on gender performativity has been widely acclaimed in feminist circles for deconstructing the presumed relationship between sex and gender and, in particular, for its radical insights into the ways in which gender is a performative phenomenon that takes on the illusion of something permanent and stable through its reiteration over time. However, in Butler's claims that biological sex can be understood as a gendered construct, it can begin to seem that Butler ignores the reality of what it means to have a body. Persons who take an objectivist approach to the issue of the body might worry that a position like Butler's reduces bodies to things only materialized or understood through discourse and threatens to erase the significance and consequences of sexual difference for bodies. Because I am convinced by Butler's arguments that sex is a gendered construct but also consider generating a thorough account of the consequences of having a body an important project for feminist thought, I am writing this paper as a preliminary exploration of ways to assert that performance theory contributes a robust conceptualization of bodies to broader feminist philosophy. I want to refute suggestions that performance theory and its proponents erase from theory the experience of being an embodied subject. Instead, I will attempt to assert that performance theory and performativity, in fact, are well-equipped to give an account for bodies, because performance theory and performativity do not assume that sex can be separated from the regulatory regimes in which sexed identities are always produced. In order to show this, I will begin by laying out Butler's conceptualization of gender performativity and the important additions to Butler's account I see resulting from Foucault's work on sexuality

as a generating force for sex. I'll present the case of Herculine Barbin as an example of the claims that performance theory makes about the ways that bodies are actually realized in societies, and then turn to a discussion of Rosalind Morris's article, "All Made Up: The New Anthropology of Sex and Gender" to bring out further evidence of the work performance theory has contributed to understandings of the body. Specifically, I want to parse Morris's presentations of thirdness in sex/gender systems and homoeroticism as two productive loci for theorizing that bodies are irreversibly implicated in and affected by the systems in which they appear.

When Butler writes in her essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" that gender is performative, she is borrowing from the vocabulary of performative speech acts developed by J. L. Austin. In Austin's terminology, performative speech acts are those incidents of language that bring a change in real-world conditions by the very act of being expressed. Some examples would include the declaration by parents upon the birth of their child, "We'll call him Aaron," or a judge stating, "I sentence you to five years in prison." In the first example, the child is named through the vocalization of the sentence; in the second, the individual is assigned a penalty for her crime through the sentence being spoken. The significant feature for both is that it is *in speaking the sentences* that what is expressed in them becomes actual. For Butler, gender is like the content of the previous performative speech acts: gender only comes into existence through being performed but has no ontological existence outside of discourse. If the parents of the child didn't say, "We'll call him Aaron," the baby wouldn't be called Aaron, and if gender weren't performed (daily, continually, and at a very deep level), Butler insists that gender, as we conceive of it, would not exist. This explication of gender as only taking

shape through its performance is the basis for Butler's further assertion that "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler "Gender" 378). The insatiable compulsion toward heterosexuality produces the genders of "man" and "woman," but it cannot be shown that heterosexuality arises from independently-originating essences of "man" and "woman." Instead, it must be seen eventually that compulsory heterosexuality is obsessed with establishing the binary genders "man" and "woman" as supposedly independently-existing categories and confirming those two genders as the origin of their imitations, like drag (Butler "Gender" 378). In fact, "the origin requires its derivations in order to affirm itself as an origin" (Butler "Gender" 379). Since what is presumably original (the two heterosexual, oppositional binary genders) necessitates its imitations to establish the fact of originality, it comes to seem that the imitation precedes the origin, but this temporal ordering is no more favorable than the one it has replaced. Instead, Butler's idea seems to be that the imitation and the copy are so utterly interwoven that neither can be said to sequentially precede the other. Thus "imitators" of heterosexual gender like drag queens and butches and femmes are implicated by, but not temporally derived from, heterosexual "man" and "woman" (Butler "Gender" 379).

In "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," Butler takes aim at the distinction that has been thus far elucidated between sex and gender in feminist thought and arrives at some surprising conclusions. The thematic core of the chapter is in outlining Butler's opposition to the radical separation of sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders that has been productive and beneficial for feminists, up to this point, to adopt. The basic logic Butler is working against is one that presumes that biological sex is a pure entity upon which social genders are constructed. I found it most revealing to Butler's project of

investigating sex and gender to try to think through some of the rhetorical questions Butler poses about the nature of sex, particularly these: “And what is ‘sex’ anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such ‘facts’ for us?” (Butler “Subjects” 7). In my mind, sex is not strictly anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, but a synthesis or combination of these things that varies from moment to moment and person to person. When a baby is born, the assignment of a particular sex to that child usually relies only upon anatomical evidence: whether or not the child has a penis. When athletes in the Olympics, like Castor Semenya, are forced to undergo sex verification testing, the chromosomal status of the individual is used to establish their sex. And a transsexual man may very readily claim his sex to be male and brandish as anatomical proof of his maleness having undergone sex reassignment surgery and as hormonal proof of his maleness hormone therapy: the “female” fact of his chromosomes may be set aside as irrelevant to determining his sex. I hope that in providing these three cases I have been able to demonstrate why one might be skeptical of the scientific discourses that take it as their prerogative to determine, reveal, or produce the sex of individuals: clearly these scientific discourses employ varying bases toward their end of clarifying what sex (a person) is. Since a synthesis or assortment of anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones is necessary to make sex clear, sex already requires an interpretation by human beings of what is happening at the level of the body; it cannot be assumed that bodies display or somehow state for themselves unequivocally what sex they are. Therefore, Butler is able to say that sex is as culturally constructed as gender, and that in fact, gender is the apparatus by which the sexes are established (Butler “Subjects” 7).

The next move that Butler makes is the key to why I am convinced that performance theory has much productive dialogue to contribute to notions of the body. Not only does gender cause sex to materialize, but gender insidiously constructs sex as something prediscursive and as that which is radically and fundamentally unconstructed (Butler "Subjects" 7). This assertion challenges the logic wherein sex was understood to be synonymous with nature and gender with culture: instead, for Butler, both are culturally established, except that when it comes to sex, culture frames sex as only natural and outside the realm of culture. Bodies are framed and interpreted through the culture in which they exist, but cultural predicates enforce a paradigm in which the most salient aspect of bodies becomes their supposedly unmarked and unmediated status (Butler "Subjects" 7). Butler includes a discussion of Michel Foucault's account of sex to further elaborate the constructedness of sex. In a very brief form, I would summarize the use Butler makes of Foucault as interrogating the demands that heterosexual desire makes on the genders, and therefore, on the sexes. For oppositional heterosexual desire to operate, internally coherent categories of man and woman must exist and be fundamentally distinct from each other. These binary categories must also themselves rest on an absolute division of the sexes into male and female. Sex, then, is an effect which is constructed through a mode of sexuality's deployment: heterosexuality does not result immediately from two previously-existing sexes but instead heterosexuality produces the two apparent sexes (Butler "Subjects" 23). My claim is that performance theory elucidates and confronts the ways that the regime of compulsory heterosexuality has construed sex as that which is only natural to bodies, and that there is much to be gained by investigating bodies, both those in Western and non-Western cultures, that cannot be easily placed into

the Western sex/gender binary. For a first example of a body that elides neat Western categorization, I will turn to the person of Herculine Barbin, as presented to the world by Foucault.

Herculine Barbin was a hermaphrodite, or what would now be termed an intersex person, born in France in the 19th century. At birth, Barbin was declared female but after several affairs with women during Barbin's schooling, a medical examination was performed which revealed that Barbin had a small penis and testicles inside the vagina. After this, Barbin was pronounced male, changed names from Herculine to Abel, and lived until the time of death as a man (Morris 568). Now, the life of Barbin is in no way capable of serving as evidence that there is *no such thing* as sex. The interesting thing for me that is brought out by the example of Barbin's change in sexed identity is that it could have been otherwise. If the examination had not been performed, Barbin might have retained identification with both the categories of the "female" sex and the gender "woman" until the time of death. Barbin's body remains unchanged whether or not the examination occurs, but Barbin's sex literally changes in the event that the examination is performed. If Barbin's body can be read equally, at different moments, as male and female and Barbin can successfully inhabit both male and female sexes (as is the case, for Barbin lived without complications as female and identified as such until the point of the examination), then sex identity does not follow directly from the body but only after being mediated and established through discourse. In this instance, it is medical science that is "reading" Barbin's body and directing it toward the assumption of one sex instead of another, but I think careful consideration is warranted as to whether it is only "problematic" bodies like Barbin's that are constructed and shaped toward sexed (and

gendered) ends, or if the production of sex by medical science can be extended to include other kinds of situations. In what ways are bodies that aren't directly a challenge to the sex binary still marked, altered, or otherwise produced by discourse? Plastic surgery can be viewed as a site in which bodies are constructed so as to take on certain sexes through the incidence of the surgery. Breast augmentation surgery might serve as a kind of entry point for investigating how sex, like gender, might be performative. Persons with female genitalia who opt to have their breasts enlarged reify the commonly-assumed fact that female secondary sex characteristics accompany female genitalia. In wake of the surgery's performance, the discourse of sex imperceptibly shifts to (further) support the conception that persons with female genitals "naturally" have large breasts: but the surgery electively undergone by the individual was predetermined by the individual's inhabiting of the discourse, in that the individual was attempting to attain an increased realization of what it means to be sexed as female within that discourse.

The life of Herculine Barbin and the considerations I've presented of breast augmentation surgery are two insights into the mechanisms by which sexed identities are produced by the regulatory regimes they exist within. I will now move to an examination of examples presented by Rosalind Morris in her article, "All Made Up: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender" of the ways that bodies are inflected by and through culture. The two sections of Morris's paper that I found the most compelling were her work on thirdness in non-Western cultures and the gender dynamics of homoeroticism.

Three of the genders that Morris cites in her paper as representatives of outsiders to binary gender systems are *berdaches* in Native American culture, *hijras* in India, and

*kathoey*s in Thailand. The *berdache*, known in indigenous terms as a Two-Spirit person, could be of either sex and have sexual relationships with people of either sex. The *kathoey* is what would be regarded as an MTF trans person or effeminate gay male in a Western context: the word “*kathoey*” indicates that the individual is a type of male who presents in a feminine manner. Finally, the *hijra* of India is also a biological male who adopts a feminine gender identity. The aspect of these “third” genders that makes them points of radical departure from sexual binaries is that these third genders are not metonymic in reference to bodies the way that Western genders are (Morris 580). Metonymy is the use of a single characteristic to signify for or entail an entire concept, and the *Two-Spirit*, *hijra*, and *kathoey* all resist the metonymic logic of Western binary genders where body parts (specifically, the genitals) represent and establish the gender of the individual inhabiting the body (Morris 580). Western conceptions of “man” and “woman” have largely operated metonymically in that they can be reduced to the stand-ins of “penis” for “man” and “vagina” for “woman.” But the third genders discussed by Morris don’t work this way, and no clear-cut relationship between what is present on the body and the gender category that the body fits into can be seen. *Two-Spirit people* in Native American cultures are *Two-Spirit* equally whether they have male or female genitals; *kathoey*s in Thailand might undergo sexual reassignment surgery and change their genitals but will remain *kathoey* after the surgery; and *hijra* sometimes have all of their male sex organs removed, but persons who retain their male sex organs are uncontestedly *hijra*, as well. These non-metonymic genders can be viewed as instantiating relationships between the person and their body that have different consequences than Western relationships, because it’s hard to think from a Western

vantage point that I could alter my genitals without necessarily having both my gender *and* my sex change. This shows that the facticity of what is or is not on my body has different significances depending upon the culture that I'm in, since removing my male organs means different things if I'm a *hijra* in India than if I'm an MTF trans person in the US. Ultimately, I think this proves very elegantly that sex cannot be separated from the regulatory regimes in which sexed identities are produced.

As a queer person, I was particularly interested in the interplay of bodies of the same sex that is characteristic of homoeroticism. In trying to understand what might be of interest about the bodies that participate in homoerotic exchange, what I considered was that it might make sense to assign the bodies of lesbians and gay men to a different discourse than the bodies of straight women and men: perhaps the first set of bodies fall into something that could be termed "queer discourse" as well as into "straight discourse," while the second set of bodies only participates in "straight discourse." The terms *butch* and *femme* to me seem like they can't be fully subsumed under the lexicon of straight discourse, because, as both Morris and Butler point out, the terms are ironic appropriations and rejections of heterosexual "man" and "woman," or "imitations of an imitation," in Butler's terminology (Morris 581). If the bodies of lesbian and gay men can be thought to belong to a different discourse, then it might be more clear why these bodies can be perceived, experienced, and lived differently than the bodies of straight women and men. To make this more clear, a body might participate in the same gestures but be marked as either *butch* or masculine depending on whether this body is enveloped in queer or straight discourse, and thus the consequences for the body are different depending on the discourse in which it is located.

Feminist performance theory has revitalized discussions surrounding the body in two ways: first, by asserting that sex should not be accepted as merely that which is natural to bodies, and second, by introducing consideration of the effect of discourse on the ways that bodies are literally and figuratively constructed. Gender-construed-as-sex is not something that comes into play only at crucial moments or in ambiguous cases, but instead an overall structuring system that operates over the entire course of a person's life. For this reason, it is important to take a critical perspective on the materialization of sex and the body, and this perspective is exactly what is afforded by feminist performance theory.

Works Cited

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