To what extent is Butler's account of gender performativity helpful for understanding contemporary feminist politics?

Rhian Williams

This essay argues that Judith Butler's[1] exploration of the social (re)construction of gender provides a convincing account of how gender is both a product of pre-existing power relations, and, as a discursive construct, restructures these power relations. Her application of a post-structuralist perspective highlights that, as "power pervades the very conceptual apparatus that seeks to (re)negotiate its terms" (Butler, 1995, p.39), feminist politics itself is incorporated in this, both as a subject practicing performativity, and a political idea producing some of the norms governing how gender is performed. The main contribution of gender performativity (GP) is its reconceptualization of the subject which performs gender; its displacement of the notion that a subject has an innate identity for which it seeks expression has significant implications for how feminist politics fulfils the aim ascribed to it by Alcoff (1988, p.405), namely, the "transformation of women's lived experience in contemporary culture and the reevaluation of social theory and practice from women's point of view". This may be in terms of how a subject's agency enables the alteration of gender norms, and how the feminist political movement may limit this by using the category of "women" to refer to any particular universal identity. This essay engages with the criticisms of such advocates of the category of "women" as Gunnarsson (2011) and Nussbaum (1999) to argue that whilst this may be useful for certain political projects, only by recognising that categorisation always represents a political decision, and interrogating this decision, can subjects be liberated from the idea that their performance of gender must correspond to any particular

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[1] Whilst this essay is based on a broad awareness of Butler's canon and critical engagements with various parts of it, the essay draws specifically on the following texts: "Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions" (1988), "Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'" (1993), "Contingent Foundations" (1995), and "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" (2006).

characteristic that is innate to them. In understanding "women's liberation as liberation *from* identity" (Fraser, 1995, p.71), Butler (1993, p.126) provides both a conceptually wider form of liberation than is demonstrated by the representational politics advocated by critics, and, in emphasising the "internally unstable" nature of gender norms, suggests how feminist politics may bring about such liberation.

The concept of GP seeks to provide an account of how individuals participate in (re)constructing gender norms, which have no root in any innate characteristic of the body. Barad (2003, p.804) sees this as challenging the idea of representationalism, the "belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent". Instead, in articulating an idea about oneself or another, that idea is brought into being. Fraser (1992, p.185) describes this as taking "signification [the expression of an idea] as action rather than representation". It is through the individual's citation of gender norms that the "reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates" (Butler, 1993, p.2) operates, bringing the idea of gender, and indeed the gender of any individual, into being. Gender thus has no connection to any innate identity, or human biology. Whilst Butler (1993, p.xi) argues that certain powerful structures and discourses act as rules governing how individuals may perform their gender to situate them within a "domain of intelligible bodies", inherent to the concept of performativity is it's "instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization" (Butler, 1993, p.2). Each time an individual cites gender norms, they enact them in a slightly different manner, leaving the identity attached to a gender, or the idea of gender itself, open to being reworked. Both Barad (2003) and Barvosa-Carter (2005) suggest taking a more Foucauldian view of discourse than Butler appears to, "broadening their working definition of discourse" (Barvosa-Carter, p.186) to include "matters of practices/doings/actions" (Barad, p.802) in a definition of how discourse operates. They

suggest this provides a fuller understanding of how gender is performed; as such, this essay will use Barad's (2003, p.819) definition of "discourse" as "that which constrains and enables what can be said" to represent the linguistic, cultural and power structures governing how subjects are constituted and gender performed.

This concept of performativity is based on a particular understanding of the relationship between the idea of identity, and the subject, which "establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated" (Butler, 2006, p.203). In contrast to dominant discourses, Butler (2006, p.196) argues that there is no "'I' that pre-exists signification", or as Barvosa-Carter (2005, p.177) puts it, "Butler rejects the view that any aspect of the subject is prediscursive". Instead, the subject is composed solely by the ideas it encounters; subjects are the "effects of institutions, practices, discourse with multiple points of origin" (Butler, 2006, p.xxx), which Barvosa-Carter (2005, p.176-177) suggests could include "language, cultural forms". This understanding regards the notion of a prediscursive self as a political construction; assuming its validity as an idea fails to analyse "the question of the political construction and regulation of the subject itself" (Butler, 1995, p.47). In failing to identify the power relations concealed in assuming the prediscursive self as a philosophical foundation, feminist politics "foreclose[s] the domain of the political" (Butler, 1995, p.36), limiting its capacity to theorise change. Butler argues that a feminist politics must recognise that dominant political discourses exert power over women by suggesting that, as subjects, they have an innate and unchanging identity that they will inevitably express through performing gender.

This rendering of the subject highlights that the features of a "seemingly coherent identity that the subject misrecognises as its being" (Campbell, 2005, p.90) are highly restricted; along with Rich (1980) and Chambers (2007), Butler (2006, p.198) emphasises the dominance of discourses of "gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" as rules delimiting what a subject may assert as their innate self. She uses the concept of intelligibility to demonstrate that these rules are so powerful that the subject is "intelligible only through its appearance as gendered" (Butler, 2006 p.44); attempts to identify and perform an innate identity deviating from certain dominant discourses are "logical impossibilities" (Butler 2006 p.24), which society does not regard as human. This has consequences for both the constituency that feminist politics claims to represent – the individual woman constrained by the requirement to express an identity within narrow terms – and for the feminist political movement conceived as a subject itself. If, in order to constitute a subject able to affect change, the feminist political movement is required to have an identity external to those points of view which constitute it, it is constrained to the terms of this identity, as emphasised below.

In order to understand the implications of this construal of the subject for feminist politics, this section will explore Butler's somewhat unclear account of agency within GP. Gunnarsson (2011, p.33) accuses Butler of regarding individuals' actions as "pre-determined by…their positions", yet this seems a definite misreading, as Butler (2006, p.201) explicitly states that GP is "neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary". Understanding GP as an intra-activity confirms this, as Barad (2003, p.826) argues that "intra-activity is neither a matter of strict determinism nor unconstrained freedom". Butler (1988, p.520) regularly confirms that the instability inherent to GP lies in the "possibility of a different sort of repeating". However, Nussbaum (1999) criticises Butler for failing to show where this

ability to alter gender performances comes from; Butler is clear that subjects are constituted entirely by the discourses mediating their existence, yet does not explain how they provide subjects with the "resources" (Benhabib 1992 p.218) required for the variation of these very discourses.

Applying the insights of theorists such as Barvosa-Carter (2005), helps to bridge this gap. Barvosa-Carter (2005, p.179) emphasises that subjects must always be seen as products of multiple discourses, as "it is this multiplicity of construction that, in my view, is the primary source for the variation in performativity that is the hallmark of agency". The ways in which these discourses may interact to produce a subject are not uniform and cannot be predetermined, as they demonstrate to the subject multiple, often conflicting, ways to perform gender. Whilst Fraser (1995, p.66) reads Butler as assigning the subject "critical capacities", she emphasises that these "critical capacities are culturally constructed". Therefore, whilst subjects have the capacity to think critically about a discourse telling them how to perform their gender, they require an alternative interpretation provided by an alternative discourse to catalyse this. There are innumerable sources for this: an event demonstrating an alternative reading of gender; the mutual exclusion of two intersecting discourses' gender norms; even an awareness of Butler's discourse that there are multiple ways to perform gender. Because subjects are always multiply constituted (by discourses which are themselves non-unitary), they always exercise agency in negotiating interpretations of how to perform gender; however, their awareness of the choices they make may be heightened by one of the experiences above. Butler's (1988, p.526) own emphasis on the constitution of subjects by plural "directives" certainly makes this a plausible reading of subject agency within GP. Gunnarsson (2011) in fact agrees that this reading, in incorporating the views of intersectional feminists such as Crenshaw (1991), provides a useful way of understanding

how existing at the overlap of multiple discourses, for example, race and gender, significantly impacts on how gender is performed. Whilst Butler herself never clearly articulates how the subject alters performance of gender, Barvosa-Carter (2005) and Fraser (1995) find this ability lies in the subject's construction by multiple discourses. A clearer understanding of this central tenet of GP is vital for a feminist understanding of how individual women, and the feminist political movement, may use their agency as subjects to alter their own performances, and to diversify discourses available to other subjects in the performance of gender.

This account, which finds the subject's agency to alter gender norms to lie in it's unique construction by multiple discourses, renders any claim to represent the category of "women" as a subject theoretically problematic. In claiming to represent a common identity, feminism fails to question how the very requirement for a subject to express an innate identity may be constraining, which "preclude[s] a radical inquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself" (Butler, 2006, p.xxxii). Furthermore, "those feminist positions that construct the univocal category of 'women'" (Butler, 1988, p.530), reify constructed gender differences by suggesting there is some innate aspect of identity shared universally amongst the group it represents. This is problematic in two particular ways. Firstly, this limits the change that feminism as a movement is able to envisage, tying what can be imagined as "woman" to whatever it regards as uniting all "women". For example, if it defined "women" as "*mothering*" (Nicholson, 1992, p.60), feminism would demarcate this aspect of "women's" identity as beyond alteration. By freeing the term "women" from any fixed point of common identification, "then possibilities for new configurations of the term become possible" and "unanticipated meanings might come to bear" (Butler, 1995, p.50). Secondly, in asking "through what exclusions has the feminist subject been produced", Butler (1995, p.48)

regards any attempt to describe an identity category as normative; thus whatever aspect of their identity feminism regards as universally experienced by "women" excludes those individuals who make different normative judgements in describing their identity. Nicholson (1992) agrees that the meaning attached to any given term or experience is so culturally specific that, even where the same experience is shared across cultures, it cannot be presumed to have the same effect on different subjects. She suggests that the use of such universalisations as "women" tends to disregard this, as "the meanings attached to such terms have reflected the meanings these terms possess in contemporary Western culture" (Nicholson, 1992, p.60), thus excluding those who experience gender norms differently. Therefore, in attempting to articulate any form of identity common to the category of "women", feminism "reifies sexual difference" (Butler, 1988, p.530); this limits the change it seeks to achieve in how subjects perform gender, and excludes from feminist politics those who perform gender differently.

This claim that "'identity' as point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement" (Butler, 1995, p.50) has been fiercely repudiated; this section will explore criticisms of both this argument, and the relevance of GP to empirical feminist politics more broadly. Amongst others, Gunnarsson (2011, p.24) claims that the "category 'women' is absolutely indispensable to the feminist project". She argues that even if one conceives of a gender as a performed product, it's "relative stability, autonomy and causal efficiency" (Gunnarsson, 2011, p.30) gives it a material impact on women's bodies and lives. She sees Butler's emphasis on the lack of any innate unification amongst "women" as denying the "material relation between a woman's life and her structural gender position" (Gunnarsson, 2011, p.34); Nussbaum (1999) and Benhabib (1995) agree that this relation is best challenged by a politics representing the concerns of "women" as an interest group.

This seems an unfair reading of Butler's (1993, p.15) account of the power of gender structures; the very crux of her argument being an appreciation of the "materialization of regulatory norms". Furthermore, despite problems associated with the category, she accepts that, in contexts where politics is representational, there may be "some political necessity to speak as and for *women*" (Butler, 1995, p.49). Butler's (1988, p.529) point is that the deployment of this category must always be considered as political rather than relating to "a shared cultural reality which cannot be found"; as Nicholson (1999, p.66) puts it, the use of the category must "recognise itself as political", strategically weighing the consequences of the exclusions it makes, against the speaker's political aims. In Fraser's (1995, p.69) view, this questioning of the category is in itself a "political resource", with Butler (1995, p.50) regarding these debates as something to be "safeguarded and prized", as an alternative discourse catalysing subjects (whether this be individuals, or feminism as a political movement) to use the reflexive capacities described above to think critically about how they perform gender. Whilst Gunnarsson (2011) argues that the material gains made by using the category of "women" make it vital for feminist politics, only by questioning the political rationale behind each usage of the category can individuals be aware of the forms of oppression it leaves unchallenged or perpetuates.

The difficulty of translating these ideas into a programme of political action has led critics to doubt their practical application to contemporary feminist politics. Nussbaum (1999, p.42) sees the lack of an "empirical discussion of resistance" as a major failing in Butler's work. This seems to somewhat miss Butler's (1988, p.529) point that the very decision to "prescribe an explicit feminist political program", by determining certain issues and solutions as relevant to a represented constituency, is itself political. The insight Butler provides is that

feminist politics should constantly seek to question the relevance of its own agenda; this is entirely incompatible with any suggestion of a programme of action. Furthermore, despite incoherency in her positioning of agency, Butler is clear that GP allows subjects to perform gender differently and through this, they can bring about change in line with their chosen political agenda.

Lack of a defined political programme reflects the fundamentally anti-normative stance derived from Butler's post-structuralist position, preventing her from prescribing which norms a feminist politics should seek to challenge, and what they should be replaced with. Nussbaum (1999, p.42) suggests that without "a normative theory of social justice and human dignity", as its basis, feminists remain unguided on how to use the agency that Butler's theory of GP ascribes them; they do not know which norms to subvert when making "proposals for social change" (Nussbaum, 1999, p.37). Nussbaum valorises what she sees a historic alliance between feminist academia and activism, which she fears Butler's post-structuralist classification of norms as universally violent renders impossible. Rather than denying the achievements of the "concrete projects" that Nussbaum (1999, p.37) attributes to this alliance, Butler (1988, p.529) emphasizes that feminist actions advance the "strategic purposes" of particular political agendas, rather than universally improving the condition of "women". Barvosa-Carter (2005, p.184) suggests an awareness of this enables feminists to "identify and critique the misleading claims advanced by their political opponents", and engender greater consideration of the political consequences of feminist actions. Furthermore, Butler (2006) does offer guidance in how insights gained from her theory of GP may be used in "practical struggles" (Nussbaum, 1999, p.37); without limiting feminists to any particular programme of action or definition of "women", she suggests these should focus on "increasing the possibilities for a livable life for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual

margins" (Butler, 2006, p.xxviii). Therefore whilst Butler (2006) concurs with Nussbaum (1999) that active challenges are vital to contemporary feminist politics, she emphasises that diversity amongst individual experiences of gender norms prevents any particular example of activism being able to claim to improve the lives of "women" as a group, instead targeting those gender norms perceived by the challenger to most constrain the group they define as "women".

Even if one agrees with Butler that the subversion of the norm of heterosexuality is key to freeing up how subjects perform their gender, the methods she suggests for conducting such subversion have been criticised, particularly by Nussbaum (1999, p.43) as explored above, as being irrelevant to "material or institutional change". Furthermore, Benhabib (1995, p.29) is wary that basing feminist political action in the subversion of gender norms represents a "retreat from utopia"; she argues that, in avoiding the articulation of an alternative imagined future, Butler's position implies that "radical transformation is unthinkable" (Benhabib, 1995, p.30), which Benhabib sees as defeating to feminist politics. Whilst Butler's (2006, p.xxiv) claim that acting to subvert gender norms represents this "radical shift in one's notion of the possible and the real", McNay (1999, p.183) appreciates the concerns of Nussbaum (1999) and Benhabib (1995) in suggesting that Butler's advocacy of resignification assigns too great a priority to the symbolism of the subversive act, which "requires a contextualisation within wider socio-economic relations". Again, a Foucauldian interpretation of discourse may aide a feminist politics seeking to contextualise the insights provided by Butler's account of GP, as this places greater emphasis upon the how actions in a broad range of material and symbolic spheres may increase the possibilities for performing gender differently (Barad, 2003).

Butler's account of GP firmly posits both the notion of identity itself, and the regulation by social norms of how this is expressed, as sources of female oppression. Whilst we can never escape performing gender, we may use the reflexive capacities accorded us as subjects to critique the multiple discourses constructing us, thus altering how we perform gender. Awareness of gender as a performance which one can change, rather than an innate aspect of a pre-discursive self, may come from the interaction between the discourses constituting a subject. Butler's rejection of the category of "women" – due to its assumption of a universal identity amongst "women" as an (inevitably damaging) norm – has been taken to imply that feminist politics cannot in itself form one of these discourses. Certainly, as the use of the term "woman" cannot escape from prescribing a fixed and exclusionary identity to those it claims to represent, a feminist politics which assumes an aspect of universality amongst "women" (as accepted by Nussbaum and Gunnarsson) is extremely limited in the extent to which it may challenge how performances of gender are deemed "intelligible" by society. However, the possibility for feminist movements which recognise the political nature of claims to represent any particular group, and of the importance of questioning their own agendas, is arguably compatible with Butler's account. In offering a multiplicity of descriptions of the category of "women", feminist political movements expand the agency of individual subjects to perform gender in ways that "rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility" (Butler, 1993, p.3) imposed by more traditional and universalising norms. Therefore the main contribution of Butler's account of GP to feminist political theory is its suggestion that, through questioning discourses surrounding gender, feminist politics may weaken those norms with greatest constraining power over how gender is performed by individuals.

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