Performance & Performativity – Dr Stephen Greer[1]

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Focusing on the work of Judith Butler, this lecture will attempt to unpack some of the more challenging and provocative claims surrounding the notion of performativity. In doing so I want to unpick some of the connections and distinctions between performativity and performance, and offer performativity as a critical strategy for thinking about performance and our culture at large. Though the title of this lecture is performance and performativity, it is also about the performance of gender – more accurately, the performative rendition of gender.

In any case, I'll start with some working definitions of performativity –ambitious, even impossibly broad-sounding definitions which extend far beyond the domain of performance – definitions which I will then attempt to elaborate, defend and likely contradict.

If performance presumes the existence of an actor – the one who acts – then Butler's account of performativity contests the very notion of the actor. There is no 'doer behind the deed' other than the one created by the action of 'doing the deed' itself.

Performativity describes a process by which the given becomes given – that is, how what we understand to be unremarkable, normal and natural is established. Beginning it describes how our social reality and our bodies as we take them for granted acquire and retain the quality of being a permanent and neutral surface on which culture and politics comes to operate.

It describes a process by which some bodies get produced as 'real', authentically and fully human bodies, while others are registered as abject, as disposable, as less deserving of protection.

It describes the fierce constraints that we encounter each day in the negotiation and public expression of our identities and the bodies we

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live in; at the same time, it describes the radical possibilities of improvisatory agency which are part of that very same structure of subjection.

Though Butler argues that gender is a mechanism of constraint – constituting a set of norms which define us as normal or abnormal – it also describes a locus for productive activity: 'Gender performativity may be inevitable but gender identity is always open and incomplete' (Lloyd 1999: 200). It is this openness – its orientation on a horizon of possibility – which characterizes the larger trajectory of Butler's work, and its contribution to and intersection with the evolving field of queer studies.

In working through these ideas, I'm going to draw primary arguments from three of Butler's most well-know texts: *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter* and *Undoing Gender*. Butler's work on performativity exceeds these three volumes and continues to develop in response to dialogue with a number of critics, some of whose thinking I'll address briefly towards the end of our time together today.

Before turning to Butler, though, I want to spend a few moments with the work of the philosopher of language, J.L. Austin, whose theorization of the performative provides us with a useful framework for understanding Butler's later claims. Butler's work draws on a rather broader framework of thought than Austin's alone, but it nonetheless offers us a starting place for understanding her work.

Austin's analysis – first offered as a series of lectures at Harvard in the mid 1950s and later published as the book *How To Do Things With Words* - begins in a distinction between two different operations of language.

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The first kind of language that Austin describes is 'constative' – it produces true or false statements or descriptions that we can subject to some kind of test by which we could come to an agreement about their accuracy. If I say 'the sky is blue today', we could go outside and look up, though seeing as I am in Glasgow, you might put on a coat first.

The second kind – which Austin suggests we call performatives – are utterances in which speaking *is* or *is part of* the doing of an action. It is speech that does not merely describe an action or an aspect of reality – the speech is or is part of the action in itself. Austin's phrasing is deceptively clear: 'The issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action'.

A frequently given example of such speech is the utterance 'I do' in a wedding ceremony. It is speech that is an action – it makes the person who utters it a married person.

One of the first consequences of this distinction is that performatives may not be subject to truth claims about a situation in quite the same manner as constative utterances because, in many respects, performatives *are* the situation at hand. In any case, Austin sets out a number of conditions for performative speech, conditions that need to be in place for such speech to be successful in working its action (in Austin's terms, for it to be happy or 'felicitous').

Performatives rely on a conventional procedure (that is, an established procedure known in advance) that is performed by people in circumstances that are appropriate to that procedure. That procedure must be executed by all participants correctly and completely, and that when the procedure is designed for the purpose of persons 'having certain thoughts and feelings', then they need to actually have those thoughts and feelings.

So, in the example of the wedding ceremony, the person saying 'I do' only becomes married to another person if they say the phrase at the correct moment of the ceremony in front of another person who is also consenting to marry. Both parties need to be legally permitted, in that jurisdiction, to enter into marriage given their age, formally recognised gender, existing marital status and, perhaps, whether they are considered to be of sound mind. The whole thing also has to be witnessed, and in that witnessing authorized – not merely by onlookers, but by an official of the state who is employed to record the transaction on official forms to be countersigned by those present.

I think I make the whole thing sound very romantic.

As Austin's lectures continue, the distinction between constative and performative becomes less clear – as James Loxley notes, Austin draws attention to statements in which constative truth involves performative felicity and statements whose performative felicity seems to involve their constative truth.

In refining his arguments, Austin makes some further distinctions – between locution (the semantic or refential content of speech) and two other dimensions: the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. Very briefly, the illocutionary dimension of speech describes the act that is attempted or accomplished by an incidence of speech. The perlocutionary dimension is the effect produced *by* saying something – it describes the contingent consequences or effects that might or might not follow.

My primary focus today is Butler's understanding of the performative rather than Austin's so I won't go much further into the specific details of his arguments, but instead highlight two aspects of his thinking which seem particularly helpful, and on which we will rely later. The first is the recognition that performative speech is highly contingent and circumstantial, constrained in advance by the intelligibility of the ritual ceremonies on which they depend and which they invoke.

Second, to draw on Loxley, 'performative utterances are exposed to trouble because they are conventional – ritual ceremonial – performances', invoking characteristics or elements of speech that are not theirs alone. Speech is haunted by the possibility of its failure – by 'misfires' in which speech does not achieve its intended effect, or achieves multiple unintended effects alongside or even contrary to the desired result.

One area of my research has been concerned with the emergence of a consciously-identified lesbian and gay theatre in the UK in the early 1970s, and its relationship to the nascent gay rights movement. I have been particularly interested in an emphasis work on 'coming out' as an essential individual and collective political act, and its status as a constative claim (reporting the 'truth' of sexual identity) and, at the same time, a performative claim which renders a non-heterosexual subject socially-intelligible.

At the climax of an early play by the company Gay Sweatshop called *Mister X*, the play's titular character – who initially sees no point in the cause of gay liberation – makes the decision to come out. In that moment, the theatrical event – the character 'coming out' – merges with a real world event as the performer playing the part introduces his own name and address.

I am interested how in that moment the biographical detail of the performer – and the presence of the performer's own 'real' body, stepping out from the theatrical frame – might work to secure the efficacy of a theatrical incidence of speech as a political intervention. But – in that moment - does the body authorize the speech, or does the speech perform the body?

In any case, 'coming out' is a troublesome and highly-contextual kind of speech act, laced with the possibility of failure. One may misheard, misunderstood, disbelieved or have one's claim refused. People might think you're joking. People might hear and understand you but dismiss you: of course, everybody already knew.

One might also come out without intending to do so. After all, the social performatives of coming out extend beyond statements in speech alone. Alan Sinfield notes Noel Coward's 1929 advice to Cecil Beaton against looking or sounding queer: 'I take ruthless stock of myself in the mirror before going out. A polo jumper or unfortunate tie exposes one to danger' (1999, p. 99).

The practice of 'coming out' can be understood as an attempt to secure oneself against the precarious possibility of exposure by asserting a form of self-determination: I name myself.

However, coming out is a speech act which unfolds in time and space, and without leaving a reliable trace. It is a live event. Queer legal theorist Janet Halley observes that even the most 'forthright and fearless gay man or lesbian cannot "come out" once and for all in a single public disclosure; as she moves from one social setting to another, she will have to come out afresh or acquiesce in assignment to her of a nonreferential public identity' (Halley, 1994, p. 168).

If you were to come out in a public lecture live-streamed across Scotland, and the internet connection drops – just for a moment in an inopportune place.. well..

..in any case, we might begin to see why a theory of performativity might be a particularly valuable and consequential contribution to theories of public knowledge – allowing us to examine how and why certain kinds of social reality get produced while others falter, and perhaps even the circumstances under which speech gets recognized as knowledge at all.

In his discussion of speech acts which fail, Austin refers to the 'etiolation' of speech – a word meaning to enfeeble or deprive of natural vigour. One example that Austin offers of such speech is theatrical performance, such as that 'a performative utterance will be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage'.

I think we can agree that's a one star review.

We might, though, observe situations in which the 'hollowness' of theatrical speech is a desired effect.

Theatre scholar Helen Freshwater draws on Austin's performative to read the dynamic of marriage equality protests led by the pressure group OutRage! during the 1990s – in particular the staging of a mass queer wedding in Trafalgar Square in 1991 in which participants exchanged alternative vows of commitment. Freshwater suggests it was the *failure* of those acts to enact a marriage – and secure the attendant legal rights that accompany being married – that served to produce a critique of the unequal distribution of privilege, illustrating the highly constrained terms on which only certain relationships are recognized as legitimate and deserving of protection by the state.

Judith Butler's account of performativity, though, takes us beyond speech acts to address the materiality of the gendered body in a way which may challenge a number of commonsensical beliefs about both gender and sex.

In the original preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler positions the work as an intervention within the field of feminist politics which attempts to trouble the dominance of a binary framework for thinking about gender. In the expanded preface to the 1999 edition, Butler clarifies: the work was intended to criticize what she perceived as a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory that restricted

the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity.

At the heart of Butler's writing is an ethical project, one which seems central to much of the field of queer scholarly enquiry – an attempt to expand the range of lives which liveable and qualify as fully human, an attempt to render gender as descriptive of possibility rather than a merely proscriptive account of what bodies must be. It is a project that recognizes the serious – and violent – sanctions that face subjects whose bodies do not or cannot conform to presumed categories for being human.

In any case, *Gender Trouble* begins in a challenge to the usefulness of an analytical distinction between sex and gender which emerges from second wave feminist politics – that is, from notions of sex as referring to biology, the given material body, and gender as the cultural beliefs and practices which apply to such bodies; the inflection between male /female and masculine/feminine.

This thinking is part of a broad interrogation of gender essentialism, the belief that those characteristics defined as women's or men's essence are shared in common by all such people at all times', permanent fixed characteristics and social functions organized in binary opposition, such as that being a man is defined by not being a woman and vice versa.

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Here, the work of Helene Cixous offers a critique of the opposition of man/woman in its relation to a larger, hierarchical, patriarchal system of values, an analysis in which the feminine side is always seen as the negative, weaker, powerless instance.

While the distinction between sex and gender may allow the critique of fixed, reductive and homogenizing roles for men and women – by observing that male-bodied people can have traditionally feminine qualities, and that female-bodied people can have conventionally masculine traits – that thinking only takes us so far, as it remains the product and function of a binary logic which opposes male to female, and assumes a mimetic relationship between gender and sex.

Put very crudely, it might do little to destabilise the idea that there are a still 'real men' who look like 'real men'.

In any case, the radical proposal that Butler offers is that we might think about gender as the apparatus by which the sexes themselves are produced.

Gender is not merely the cultural interpretation of sex or the 'rules' which apply to differently sexed bodies, but the discursive means through which 'natural sex' is produced and established as somehow pre-discursive, a neutral surface on which culture later acts.

Accordingly, Butler's argument is that our acts, gestures and desires produce the effect of an internal core of substance that we then take for sex.

'Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed', writes Butler, 'are performative in the sense that the essence or identity of what they […] purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means' (GT 173).

Not only is sex always, already gender, but the gendered self has no ontological status – that is, status as a subject – apart from the acts that compose it.

Okay. So. Let's take a few steps back and walk more slowly through those claims, and their reasoning.

The first claim is that there is no 'natural body' which pre-exists culture and discourse. Instead, 'we can only know sex *through* gender, and although we "become" our genders, there is no place outside gender which precedes this becoming' (Salih & Butler, 2004, p. 21).

Sex is always already gender because our understanding of it is constructed through discourse, through culture.

Even if we concede that there is some quality of the material body that we can refer to without reference to construction (let's say chromosomal difference), Butler observes that such a concession

nonetheless takes place through discourse and is formative of the very thing that it concedes.

We might consider a parallel line of argument that goes something like this: though we might examine some minimal biological component of our bodies under a microscope and come to some agreed determination that this kind of cell is different from that kind of cell, the moment at which we start to make any kind of policy decision about what that difference might mean we have entered into the realm of cultural judgment and the space of discourse

In arguing that discourse is formative of the body, Butler does not claim that it originates, causes or exhaustively composes the body; rather, then point is that we do not have a 'pure' access to that body which does not in some way involve a discursive claim. When it comes to the matter of bodies, the constative claim is always to some degree performative.

So Butler's account does not erase the material body but rather asks us to consider the processes and terms by which the body acquires its materiality (and, accordingly, why some bodies or some parts of some bodies are considered aberrant or even inhuman).

Butler's argument is that what we take to be materiality – the having a male body or having a female body – is not the expression of an interior quality but rather something which is manufactured through a 'a sustained set of acts, positioned through the gendered stylization of the body'. (GT xv)

If we describe performativity as the process by which the gendered subject is constructed, that construction is not a single act or a straightforwardly causal process. It is instead a reiterative process that takes place in and across time. Gender acquires its naturalized effect through the sedimentation of that process over time: it builds up in layers and stabilizes.

Gender, perhaps, describes a particular set of habits. If we have the expression 'gender fluid' as referring to people whose sense of their gender is something other than categorically fixed, perhaps we can invoke the phrase 'gender congealed' to describe the performative rendition of sex which produces the effect of fixity.

Here's Butler again in what is probably the most often quoted passage from Gender Trouble as a whole:

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> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or a locus of identity from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (GT 179)

Gender is not a stable identity with which or from which one acts – it is the appearance or illusion of stability that is produced by the repetition of acts over time.

Now, Butler's notion of the performative has been read to suggest an open-ended improvisational quality to identity – I am whatever I choose to perform, and that I might begin to start or stop a given performance of gender wholly according to my own preferences.

Elspeth Probyn, for example, has noted that such 'celebration and appropriation' of Butler's work has concluded 'that we can have whatever type of gender we want, and that there are as many genders as there are people' (1995, p. 79).

Now Butler has herself responded to this optimistic but somewhat misleading account of her work on a number of occasions arguing that performativity consists 'in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's "will" or "choice"' (1993, p. 234).

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In other words, it's not simply a matter of free will and self-determination.

Sara Salih offers some further clarity: '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 determined within this regulatory frame, and the subject has a limited number of 'costumes' from which to make the constrained choice of gender style. (Salih, 2002, p. 63).

I will return to the question of agency in a moment, but for now it is helpful to recall our understanding of a performative utterance as having a ritual quality which is known or is legible in advance of its utterance.

Butler's emphasis is placed on a 'stylized repetition of acts' and a 'stylization of the body'. Understood in this way, gender appears as the effect of citations or corporeal quotations of the standards for gender which come before us, already in cultural circulation before we are born, before our embodiment of them, before we are taught them and before we internalize them.

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We can think of these standards as norms in the sense of the culturally and historically specific and contingent rules concerning conduct and appearance which act as standards of normalization for maleness and femaleness which, in turn, govern our very social intelligibility as subjects.

Here, 'sex' functions as a regulatory ideal, a kind of organizing principle for our performance of gender (a performance which, paradoxically, gives rise to the illusion of that very ideal as something persistently real).

I suggested at the beginning of this talk that I was interested in how performativity might serve as a reading strategy, a critical approach for viewing and understanding performance. I am equally – if not more interested – in exploring the ways in which performance informs theory, how performance might elaborate the specificity of performativity's powers of interpellation and subjection.

An example:

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John Tiffany's production of the play *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke, one of National Theatre Scotland's most widely and internationally

toured productions. Based on interviews conducted by Burke with former soldiers who served in Iraq, the play attempts to tell the story of the role of the legendary Black Watch regiment in the war on terror through the eyes of the men on the ground of the conflict.

There's a sequence in the first third of the play in which the play's central character Cammy narrates the history of the regiment through Culloden, the American war of independence, the Boar war, the first and second world wars, up to Iraq. As he speaks, a red carpet is rolled out across the length of the stage and the other soldiers begin to manouevre him in and out of the distinctive uniforms of the regiment's history. But the history of military masculinity that unfolds – staged as though on the catwalk of a fashion show – involves more than outward dress of the uniform: it also involves a particular stylized performance of the body that produces a body capable of fulfilling a particular purpose.

As Burke's script notes, 'they resemble a squad assembling and disassembling a military cannon'.

Gender emerges as something which is done rather than that which one merely has: something which has a history that extends beyond the persistence of our bodies.

Yet if gender is something that we do rather than something that we have, the terms of the 'doing' are not exclusively in our hands. In Black Watch, figuratively and literally in the hands of others.

The performativity of gender has an ineluctably social dimension: '..one does not do one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary' (Butler 2002: 1).

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Another example of a rather different kind of performance: Rosana Cade's *Walking:Holding*, an experiential work which takes place outside of conventional theatre spaces and involves one audience member at a time walking through the city holding hands with a range of different people on a carefully designed route. The performers, or 'hand holders' within the piece reflect a range of different genders, sexualities, ages and races, disabled and non-disabled people. Initially staged in Glasgow, Cade has taken the work

around the UK and Europe, and to Hong Kong. In my experience of the work, I was taken into the busy main concourse in Glasgow central station and invited to close my eyes and count to ten: when I opened my eyes, everything that happened would be part of the performance. A friendly-looking older women approached me and invited me to take her hand and walk with her: we could talk, if we liked, or walk in silence. We did talk.

When we passed a shop window – I think the shop was selling men's formal wear as there kilted dummies in the display – we stopped and looked at our reflection: the image we presented to ourselves and to the other people on the street. After a short distance of conversation, I was passed – as though in a relay race – to another person: a very tall English drag queen. The pace of our walking changed as we moved into a sidestreet – cobbles are not not very friendly to platform heels – until I was passed to another and another, until I was walking through a shopping centre with an older man, older than my father and needing a little support to walk confidently.

Though much of this work is about discovering moments of intimacy in public spaces – an encounter with people who may be unlike yourself – it also seems to be about how one's own social presentation might shift in proximity and attachment to other bodies and, if not transformed, then made to appear differently to others. If nothing else, the experience drew my attention to the normally unmarked defaults of my everyday performance of my gender, ethnicity and sexuality, a labour which is largely invisible because its terms have become so deeply incorporated in my sense of being – well – 'being Stephen'.

Let's return to an earlier point in the argument: to argue that the gendered body is performative is to assert that it has no ontological status 'apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (GT 173). However, arguing that a subject is constituted or constructed by discursive practices is not the same as arguing that a subject is wholly determined by those practices – that is, where determination forecloses the possibility of agency.

Here, Butler observes that such performative practices are not founding acts – creating a subject once and for all time – but take the form of a regulated process of repetition and reiteration, through the repeated signification of the terms for cultural intelligibility. We do

not 'do' being male or female once; we are compelled to perform it over and over again, not least because we face sanctions when we do not approximate the norms for gender that are expected of us.

It is in that structure of repetition, though, that the possibility for agency appears.

I suggested a few moments ago that we might understand sex as a regulatory ideal, something that we might only approximate. It is because we always fail at it that we need to keep doing it in order for our gendered identities to remain socially intelligible. When we perform gender, that performance is always non-identical to itself (perhaps because it is a live performance, involving something that cannot be exactly reproduced).

To the extent that gender involves the citation of an ideal which we cannot wholly embody, gender is always constituted in failure.

Accordingly, Moya Lloyd suggests Butler's claim on the possibility of critical agency involves three linked claims:

- that one can never embody the ideal of male or female (and thus gender is constituted by / through failure)
- that the repetition that constitutes gender is always representation 'with a difference' (gender is inherently unstable and incomplete)
- that the necessity of that repetition creates a space for transformation

While gendering is a compulsory practice, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out to expectation. Though individual agency might be limited to forms of improvisation within 'a scene of constraint', the circuitous path of citation – repetition and (re)iteration –demonstrates its integral failure: quote 'norms are continually haunted by their own inefficacy; hence the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction'.

What Butler is arguing, then, is that we might understand the dependency of norms on reiterative processes as a function of their inefficacy: they are not established singularly, once and for all, but must be repeatedly renewed, and that dependency on reiteration

describes a 'weakness in the norm' might be occupied and exploited to alternative ends.

Such a practice of resignification describes a form agency which is not wholly voluntary – it is a form of agency that is implicated in the relations of power that it seeks to contest, but not reducible to the dominant terms of that power.

What might such a working of the weakness in the norm look like?

Let us turn, as all incidents of performance scholarship eventually must, to drag.

Butler first turns to drag in *Gender Trouble* - drawing on anthropologist Esther Newton's study of female impersonation, *Mother Camp* – where she suggests that what drag offers is an imitation of gender that exposes the structure of gender *as imitation*.

Drag cites gender norms so as to expose their citational status.

In the words of David Ruffolo, 'drag is a notable example of how identity is a parody: it is not a copy of an original, but a copy of the *illusion* of an original; drag is a copy of a copy'.

How does it accomplish this?

It does so drawing our attention to the dissonant relationship between three contingent dimensions of what Butler describes as our significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. As much as drag might work to produce a coherent picture, it reveals – quote – 'the distinctiveness of those aspects of gender experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity' (GT 175).

In other words, the cross-matching of an anatomy, a gender and gender performance draws our critical attention to the aspects of – for example – femininity that we take to be the natural expression of womanliness and allows us to look at them afresh *as performance.* Drag dramatizes the cultural mechanism by which sex and gender are made to appear unified.

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'In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency' (Butler 1990: 137)

Now, not all drag might accomplish this effect (and Butler returns to explain in *Bodies that Matter* that drag is not an exemplary example of performativity, only one possible instance).

Butler's discussion in *Bodies That Matter* is also focused on a very specific kind of drag in a very particular context – reading the documentary *Paris is Burning* which is concerned with drag balls in New York City, staged and attended by primarily Afrian-American or Latino men, events in which 'realness' describes the successful production of a naturalized effect – an effect which is the embodiment and reiteration of particular norms marked by race and class. One of the key developments of *Bodies That Matter* is an attempt to address how regulatory regimes other than normative heterosexuality operate to produce the body, and the argument that racial differences should not be seen as somehow subordinate to sexual differences.

In doing so, she makes plain her belief that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, observing that, quote, 'drag may well be used in service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms' (BtM 115). Drag is more than capable of being misogynistic and racist, or participating in the circulation of the same; this should, perhaps, be no surprise given that it draws on the dominant images and logics of our culture.

Though all gender might be parodic, not all parody is subversive.

Drag, then, is a performance capable of subversion to the extent that it reflects the mundane and everyday impersonations 'by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and *undermines their power by virtue of effecting their exposure'*.

It is helpful, I think, to conceive of such exposure in terms of theatricalisation – that is, an exposure which draws attention to an act *as an act*.

Drag may also be useful to an understanding of performativity because it is a site of ambivalence, one which Butler suggests reflects

'the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes' (125). We cannot simply stop doing gender, or at least not without significant consequence that may constitute a violence in itself.

There are problems which remain: the act of 'crossing' gender (masculine/feminine) and/or sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual) may operate by first accepting the coherence and validity of binary categories in accounting for identity. The structure of parody is such that its object is retained as a point of reference: we know something is being parodied when we are familiar with the 'original' work.

Subversive parodies may well be readily reincorporated – and domesticated – as forms of entertainment which serve to reinforce rather than challenge distinctions between male and female, straight and gay. I wonder where we might locate Ru Paul's Drag Race in relation to such concerns.

A route through and beyond such reasoning may be offered by the work of José Esteban Muñoz, whose writing cuts across issues of sexuality, race and queerness. Arguing that the rejection of models of self that rely upon socially prescribed identity narratives might go beyond individualistic rebellion, Muñoz proposes a strategy of 'disidentification' that might open up space for new social formations. In Muñoz's work, disidentification operates as a mode of 'recycling and rethinking encoded meaning' that

> scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. (Muñoz, 1999a, p. 31)

In other words, Muñoz's account of disidentification describes a form of performativity which involves the *incorporation* rather than simple rejection of dominant (heterosexist, racist) cultural forms and practices in order to challenge and rewrite their closed terms.

Up until this point, my account of performativity has emphasized what might be called its paranoid capacities – that is, following the work of Eve Sedgwick – a form of critique which places its faith in the

exposure of hidden patterns of hegemonic social relations, and turns on the enlightenment of an audience who were previously unaware. Muñoz's work suggests the reparative potential of performativity, a means of discovering and creating new communities of identification, resistance, survival and, I think, pleasure.

Butler is a prolific writer and I've only broached the surface of her work on performativity – I would strongly recommend *Excitable Speech*, her work on hate speech and its regulation, as well as *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*. One of the more expansive dimensions – for me, at least – in Butler's thinking has been in relation to claims on universality. As she observes in the 1999 preface to Gender Trouble, 'universality' is initially conceived in exclusively negative and exclusionary terms. In more recent writing, Butler has considered how the assertion of universality might be performative in the sense of 'conjuring a reality that does not yet exist', a future-oriented labor directed towards an open-ended category for human existence. This seems to me to run in close concert with the framing of queerness by Muñoz and others as an ideality, something on the horizon (a claim not without its own problems, not least for those who are living queerly here and now).

Butler's ongoing engagement with the call for civil rights for trans and non-binary gender people is a further, significant dimension of her work – and one in which she has addressed certain misconceptions of her writing, particularly the idea that arguing for the constructedness of gender might be to claim that certain genders are not 'real' and therefore invalid. I can strongly recommend an interview with the Transadvocate website in 2014 in which Butler asserts that the distinction between have a sense of one's gender as fixed or as fluid is 'less important than the right to be free to live it out, without discrimination, harassment, injury, pathologization or criminalization – and with full institutional and community support'.

Some final thoughts:

Mick Mangan observes that social performativity and theatrical performance may be congruent, may be related, and may resemble each other – but they are not identical. He writes:

> Evidence from past plays and performances has a complex and
> problematic status. It exists not as raw sociohistorical

documentation or data, but as the trace of a performed moment which was itself apart of the complex dialectic between the real and the imaginary.

Recalling Butler, we might dispute access to such 'raw data' on terms which are not already embedded in discourse, and argue that such data is also part of such a dialogue.

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Nonetheless, Mangan continues:

> ..the stage [...] operates as a separate space subject to its own laws, and also as an extension of the everyday. It is a place where the 'performances' of everyday life are themselves re-performed, and in the process changed. It embodies a defined set of cultural practices which are marked off from everyday social reality, while claiming at the same time important forms of continuities between theatrical representation and that everyday reality.

We may particularly see this tension at work in forms of socially and politically engaged performance that draws on documentary and verbatim material in the attempt to give a voice to the voiceless, challenge existing histories by contributing new ones or to re-open and re-stage old trials in pursuit of new justice. Though such works often make a claim on the presence of 'authentic' testimony, they also draw attention to the ways in which such speech must be theatricalised and interpellated within particular cultural conventions for it to be recognized as testimony – that is, as capable of standing witness to more than itself. In simple terms, we need the artifice of the stage to persuade us something is real.

Thinking about performance and performativity, then, involves the attempt to come to terms with this paradox and, perhaps, exploit it in ways that might open up new fields of knowledge about what it might be to be human. The terms of that exploitation – that subversive opportunity - though, cannot be easily anticipated or determined in advance and might themselves need to be continually open to the possibility of radical transformation.

I'll stop there.