

## Performance and Cultural Politics

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### PERFORMATIVITY/PERFORMANCE

Poststructuralist conceptions of the human subject as decentered by language and unconscious desire, and postmodern rejections of foundational discourses (especially totalizing conceptions of gender, race, or national identity) have all made performance and performativity crucial critical tropes, whose relatedness I want briefly to explore. In a runner-up article to her ground-breaking *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler uses performance to underscore the fictionality of an ontologically stable and coherent gender identity. Gender is rather a "stylized repetition of acts ... which are internally discontinuous ... [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief." Butler's point is not that gender is just an act, but that gender is materially "performative": it "is real only to the extent that it is performed." Performativity derives from J.L. Austin's concept of the performative utterance which does not refer to an extra-linguistic reality but rather enacts or produces that to which it refers. This anti-essentialism pushes past constructionism. It's not just that gender is culturally determined and historically contingent, but rather that "it" doesn't exist unless it's being done. And yet the intractable existence of the cultural ideologies of gender is marked by Butler in the word "repetition"; gender is the "stylized repetition of acts..." Or, put another way, the "act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene." Gender, then, is both a doing - a performance that puts a conventional gender attributes into possibly disruptive play - and a thing done - a pre-existing oppressive category. It is a cultural apparatus that coerces certain social acts and excludes others across what Butler calls "culturally intelligible grids of an idealized and Compulsory heterosexuality."

When being is de-essentialized, when gender and even race are understood as fictional ontologies, modes of expression without true substance, the idea of performance comes to the fore. But performance both affirms and denies this evacuation of substance. In the sense that the "I" has no interior secure ego or core identity, "I" must always enunciate itself. there is only performance of a self, not an external representation of an interior truth. But in the sense that I do my performance in public, for spectators who are interpreting and/or performing with me, there are real effects, meanings solicited or imposed that produce relations in the real. Can performance make a difference? A performance, whether it inspires love or loathing, often consolidates cultural or

subcultural affiliations, and these affiliations might be as regressive as they are progressive. The point is, as soon as performativity comes to rest on a performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable.

Interestingly, in Butler's more recent *Bodies That Matter*, performativity moves closer to Derridean citationality, operating within a matrix of discursive norms, and further from discrete performances that enact those norms in particular sites with particular effects. For Butler, "cultural norms" materialize sex, not the body of a given performer, even though she wishes at the outset to pose the problematic of agency. Noting that performativity in *Gender Trouble* seemed to instantiate a humanist subject who could choose her gender and then perform it, Butler is careful here not to personify norms, discourse, language, or the social as new subjects of the body's sentencing. Rather she deconstructively elaborates a temporality of reiteration as that which instantiates gender, sex, and even the body's material presence. "There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability," and again, "performativity is thus not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition." Performance, as I have tried to suggest, is precisely the site in which concealed or dissimulated conventions might be investigated. When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone's body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique. Performativity, I would suggest, must be rooted in the materiality and historical density of performance.