

Performativity and Belonging

An Introduction

Vikki Bell

JUST AS Western philosophy has been unable to shake itself free of the question of Being, so sociology, with its shorter history, has retained its initial preoccupation with the dual questions of social stratification and social reproduction. The beauty of the term ‘belonging’ is that it affords those of us who were never sure which discipline we were meant to reside within, the opportunity to address both philosophical and sociological concerns. The term enables an escape from the long shadow cast by Heideggerian formulations without completely losing philosophical questions in the consideration of identity. The concern with dwelling in the world can take a more Foucauldian turn as part of the question: what makes us who we are within a particular social complex? How are we to understand ourselves, our politics, our desires and our passions as produced within this historical present? Thus, the concern is with the ways in which technologies, discursive deployments and power/knowledge networks produce the lines of allegiance and fracture in the various orders of things within which people and objects move. Moreover, as Elspeth Probyn has highlighted (1996), the term ‘belonging’ allows an affective dimension – not just be-ing, but longing. The yearning implied within the term will also concern us here: what is identity without that affect implied more strongly by the term identification? And how is identity related to theories of ‘the subject’ or the more sociological notion of ‘agency’? Coupled with the term ‘performativity’, a term arising within linguistic theory but so powerfully introduced into feminist theory through the work of Judith Butler, one begins to see the premise from which this collection of articles arises. Reaching back to the philosophy of Nietzsche, but drawing explicitly on Foucault and linguistic theorists, Butler’s thought problematizes the task of investigating belonging by turning attention to the production of selves as effects. The articles

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presented here take as their shared ground, therefore, the need to locate oneself, philosophically and politically, within the radical critique of essentializing modes of thinking difference, investigating performativity in various contexts. An emphasis on performativity, however, does not mean an assumption of fluid, forever changing identities. Indeed, taking the temporal performative nature of identities as a theoretical premise means that more than ever, one needs to question how identities continue to be produced, embodied and performed, effectively, passionately and with social and political consequence. In the world, moreover, their appearance keeps the theorist on her toes; forms and modes of subjectivization, identity and affiliation are always complex, often surprising, and politically unpredictable.

Disrespecting disciplinary boundaries, this special issue ambitiously brings together philosophical, sociological and anthropological modes of questioning. My intention was to make explicit the links that are evident in certain approaches to these questions. I am pleased to present to the *Theory, Culture & Society* audience the conversations that have been going on within the work of scholars influenced by the work of both Judith Butler and Paul Gilroy, and to include here interviews with each of these writers, the latter in conversation with anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. While Butler and Gilroy have often met, their mutual respect and their resonances (as well as their differences) are left largely implicit in their written work. In the interview published here, Gilroy says, partly tongue-in-cheek and partly very seriously indeed, that there are reasons why he has not been 'out' about that resonance:

There are tactical limits to how much I'm prepared to be 'out' about my own radically deconstructive aspirations, with regard to race and its observance, but at the same time, I draw great inspiration from the rigour with which she has made that argument about gender, bodies and discourse in ways that always open it to the question of race.

The hope is that by putting these theories 'to work' the persuasiveness of their shared theoretical directions will be illustrated and tested, without stretching the plausibility of the connections.

The conversation between Appadurai and Gilroy was recorded on the occasion of their first meeting, which I was delighted to facilitate (an occasion dreamed up a few months earlier by Arjun and myself as we walked in the Lake District in north-west England, having escaped for a few hours from a conference at Lancaster University). They were knowledgeable, of course, about each other's writing, and the suspicions I tried to pursue concerning the similarity of their concerns and impulses were I think borne out.

The theoretical perspectives and concepts raised by these articles and interviews are numerous and complex. I want to take several themes as

routes into the collection in order to give some sense of the array and the sophistication of the interventions that the articles represent.

Belonging

Let us begin with this question of belonging. It is worth reiterating that the collection begins from a position which insists that one does not simply or ontologically ‘belong’ to the world or to any group within it. Belonging is an achievement at several levels of abstraction. Butler’s work has been vastly influential in arguing that even the notion that one belongs to a sex or gender can be problematized, not merely because of cultural and historical variation, but because gender, to cut a long story short, is an effect performatively produced. Gender is, she has written, ‘a construction that conceals its genesis, the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions’ (1990: 140). Identity is the effect of performance, and not vice versa. The articles in this special issue push this form of argument further, exploring the ways in which forms of self-identification are sustained through complex incorporations. Anne-Marie Fortier, for example, suggests the effects of forms of performative belonging can work to maintain religious affect and community, in her case in relation to an Italian émigré community in London, such that the question of belonging necessarily incorporates the issue of how common histories, experiences and places are created, imagined and sustained. Similarly, the work of Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, discussed here in my contribution, argues in relation to Judaism, that one’s Judaism is not a constant in either an essential or performative sense, but that religious and ethnic affiliation can be performed to a greater or lesser extent depending on the context within which ‘the Jew’ finds him or herself. This is argued not just in the sense of the possibilities of ‘passing’ as or as not, but also in terms of the places and communities within which one finds oneself and the sense of belonging elicited or desired.

The ‘citational’ nature of identity, a term that has become more central in Butler’s thought (see the interview presented here), is embraced in the work of the Boyarins and of Fortier in the sense that the performativity of belonging ‘cites’ the norms that constitute or make present the ‘community’ or group as such. The repetition, sometimes ritualistic repetition, of these normalized codes makes material the belongings they purport to simply describe. As Fortier writes, the highly ritualized movements that one performs in Catholic Mass are the incorporation of norms, a ‘stylized repetition of acts’ that cultivate the sign and the sense of belonging. Moreover, she suggests that since it was in her study, performed within a non-Catholic country, the communal activity of Mass produces an attachment of the group to the site of its performance. Through embodied movements, the citation operates to recall and reconnect with places elsewhere that, through those very movements, are re-membered; at the same time, a site of diasporic belonging is created.

Religious affiliation is also the subject of Chetan Bhatt's contribution here, that illustrates how highly negotiated the 'belonging' presented and promoted within contemporary Hinducentric movements is. Bhatt highlights the ways in which these movements are not conservative in the sense of making themselves 'of the past' – indeed, the belonging imagined within their discourse is one that will be enriched fully only in a future civilization – but they are examples of politicized counter-movements that incorporate within them highly problematic redeployed versions of history. In particular, the histories of people's movements across space, and the manner of their meeting with others becomes paramount, and as they inform contemporary Hindu nationalism, they necessarily append questions of blood, land, nature and culture. Bhatt traces the complexities of the citation and redeployment of cultural and historical fact by way of an example of how contemporary concepts of racism and anti-racism struggle to speak of a situation in which political discourse and movements assimilate aspects that radicals have applauded, such as anti-colonialism, alongside those that in their appeal to natural hierarchies, to notions of aryanism and racialized imagining of 'the future', resonate with proto-fascism.

Bhatt makes reference to Gilroy's work in his piece, in particular an article that appeared in *New Formations* (1996), that gives an insight into Gilroy's recent work on thinking the dangers of embracing certain counter-movements without questioning their parameters. The interview with Gilroy here, also suggests such a direction of thought, where he states that his sympathies were with the Fanon who wrote baldly, at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*: 'I will not make myself a man of the past'; but more than this, that versions of political hope and imaginings of the future, need to be kept under careful scrutiny as well. He argues:

... to be bound to the past is to become hostage to patterns of political work in our communities which are strongly authoritarian in character. I've become very interested in how a future-oriented political language can or cannot break with those patterns of authoritarian irrationalism. That has become a central issue for me. Black Protestantism has elements of looking forward, but it's always been limited by its eschatology, it always says 'well, you know those utopian questions are for another, better world'. When the authoritarian nationalism of the early twentieth century comes along and makes that utopian aspiration into a worldly thing – you have a very strange result – people like Garvey turning around and saying 'we were the first fascists, I was the one that Hitler and Mussolini stole their act from'. He goes to Germany in 1928 and looks at Hitler and says: 'I did this before'.

One of the impulses of Gilroy's work is to consider the boundaries of modes of identifications that are available in our contemporary present, and to enquire as to the histories of their constitutive assumptions around difference, leaving open the question as to whether these can be neatly divided into, say, the racist and the progressive. As a corollary, he highlights modes and sites of incorporation that produce but that may also

redeploy those histories, a theme which is taken up by many of the authors in this issue.

Differences and their Differences

As Mariam Fraser reminds us, through Butler, the problem of difference is not that which emerges between one identity and another: we have to reach beyond a model that regards people and struggles as neatly divided. Difference is sustained and produced on several levels and in complex ways, both within and beyond ‘the subject’. Butler speaks in the interview here about the way in which her work, initially focused most overtly on gender and sexuality, has begun to explicitly address questions of ‘race’ as well, and how she is reaching for an adequate way of theorizing and analysing these variables:

For me, it’s not so much a double consciousness – gender and race as the two axes, as if they’re determined only in relation to one another, I think that’s a mistake – but I think the unmarked character of the one very often becomes the condition of the articulation of the other. Then the question is how to sustain an analysis that is able to shift perspectives sequentially in such a way that no one reading is actually adequate without the other. I’m not sure that what I want is a synthetic reading. I think what I want is a set of sequential readings that expose the partiality of each constitutive reading.

The point is not to find similarities, but, she argues, is about how one site of the construction of difference can act as the ‘unmarked background’ for another. Gilroy and Bhatt both gesture in this direction when they note the masculinism of the forms of political and religious discourses under consideration; the patrilinearity of blood tropes, in which the mother disappears from the narrative, for example, can confer a racialized identity on the speaking subject that simultaneously operates to fashion a gendered mode of distinction. Fortier’s analyses of the performativity of ethnic affiliation, moreover, emphasizes the ways in which the performance of gender is central to the reaffirmations that, especially on religious and ritualized occasions, are made within the community she spent time with. The first communion, for example, involves a highly gendered ritual. The procession in honour of Our Lady of Carmel, she argues, is a moment of cultural re-processing – that is, it is not simply an authentic continuation of an Italian tradition, but is a diasporic moment in which traditions are sites for multiple memories – that symbolically foregrounds women’s bodies in the figure of the Madonna.

The argument presented in my contribution to the issue attempts to begin from such a stance, but also to consider how tempting it is to regard gender and ethnicity as operating as aspects of subjectivities that can be analysed according to the same cultural and psychic processes. Rather than assume that this is the case, I reach for some level of conceptual abstraction that would enable a conversation on such a topic to begin. The concepts I

chose are mimesis and cultural survival. Both are terms that arise in Butler's work in relation to gender, but that I trace through the former to a history of thinking about anti-Semitism, in order to highlight the import of the latter. Drawing on the work of Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, I argue that thinking gender in terms of cultural survival brings it on to the terrain by which one might more commonly speak of 'non-hegemonic' identities, and that such a manoeuvre enables one to think about the simultaneity of ethnicity and gender difference without assuming their equivalence to operate at the level of psychic processes of incorporation.

Mariam Fraser's contribution complements such a line of enquiry insofar as she addresses the tendency to list identities or analytic variables of identity – 'race', gender, sexuality – and to regard the identity politics around each as discrete. Such a stance can no longer suffice. However, Fraser's article is concerned about attempts to create a theory of identity and a mode of politics that can operate universally. She builds her position by considering the differing temporal and spatial assumptions that operate when thinking of these terms in relation to embodiment, representation and political possibilities. In particular, sexuality has a fraught relationship to 'the visual' that queer politics variously attempts to disrupt, making what is assigned to invisibility and the temporal highly visible as a political strategy. Drawing on Bourdieu's notions of habitus and distinction, and their use in the work of Beverley Skeggs, Fraser's argument is that progressive politics in one arena may very well not translate to other 'variables' especially insofar as politically progressive strategies are thought to involve practices of resignification. Class identities are not invisible – they are also about representation – but, she argues, distinctions of class are unlikely to operate in the same way that queer politics argues sexuality does with regard to issues of recognition. While identities are certainly not discrete, political strategies may struggle to grapple with what recognition might mean for different positionalities.

Politics of Visuality

If Butler's work has been premised in part upon linguistic theories of performativity, it has become widely discussed in terms of the politics of visibility. In the interview presented here, Butler responds to the question about the relation between 'textual' and 'the visual' by arguing that her motivation would be to question the ease with which the visual is understood as 'read' in the same way that texts are within a Derridean framework. Referring to the video that captured police officers beating Rodney King in Los Angeles, she argues:

I do think that there is a performativity to the gaze that is not simply the transposition of a textual model onto a visual one; that when we see Rodney King, when we see that video we are also reading and we are also constituting, and that the reading is a certain conjuring and a certain construction. How do we describe that? It seems to me that that is a modality

of performativity, that it is racialization, that the kind of visual reading practice that goes into the viewing of the video is part of what I would mean by racialization, and part of what I would understand as the performativity of what it is ‘to *race* something’ or to be ‘raced’ by it. So I suppose that I’m interested in the modalities of performativity that take it out of its purely textualist context.

The notion of performativity has encouraged many writers within cultural studies in particular, to consider the constitutive moments and modes of identity. Placing Butler in the same realm as Fanon, especially the Fanon of ‘Algeria Unveiled’, for example, opens space for discussion of modes and schemas of categorization that operate to differentiate through visual cues. Much of Fanon’s work was concerned with what Butler is terming racialization. The gaze is of course, in Butler as in Fanon, an historical deployment that does not innocently respond to visual cues, but that operates as part of a wider *dispositif* that enables cues to be seen as such. Lines of light and lines of knowledge that are entangled, as Deleuze (1992) has argued, with lines of power and subjectification. Vision and knowledge are not simply causally related, in either direction, but are entangled with each other in the schemas and complexities of specific histories and specific events.

Sara Ahmed’s contribution begins by sounding a note of caution in response to those who might leave the analysis of visibility at the point at which ‘subversions’ take place. Celebration of moments of passing or ‘crossing boundaries’ may mistake analytic illumination for political triumph; whereas, she suggests, it is also the case that ‘instability and crisis can enable the *stabilization* of relations of power’. Ahmed argues that although ‘passing’, as a phenomenon may prompt a questioning and may ‘demonstrate that there are no absolute criteria for making decisions about identity, property and belonging’, there is a need to ask: to what extent can that questioning be understood as proving something intrinsically transgressive in passing? Ahmed interrogates the notion of passing, arguing that passing is a mobile encounter that is not to be collapsed into a becoming, since the one does not become the other: there are two identities mobilized, ‘that which one “already has” and the identity one takes on’. In each encounter, one has to consider how self identity and the passer’s identification by others operate before and within the encounter, such that any discontinuity felt or ‘revealed’ is understood in relation to the movements that are taking place. Whether there is a transgressive moment depends in part, she suggests, on the reconfiguring of economies of identity. Ahmed’s argument warns that moments of resignification can be incorporated into the economies of desire and privilege that existed prior to the encounter.

Fraser discusses some similar issues, but her concern with the politics of visibility focuses on the ways in which the ‘making visible’ of certain identities – especially in relation to gay liberation – may challenge a heterosexual matrix, while simultaneously fostering a form of complicity with a commercial capitalism that appeals to differentiated identities as

‘markets’. Modes of making ‘visible’ have to be placed within a critical framework, that treats them as forms of knowledge-making, rather than as simply political uncoverings, which they may or may not be. The changing commercial conditions, as well as the changing technologies by which we ‘see’ difference, for example, change the task for comprehension and intervention. Gilroy considers new technologies an important aspect of the political present, to be linked with what one might call technologies of existence that inform self-knowledge as well as knowledge of ‘others’. Thus one needs to be turned to:

... the value of the technological intermediation of our corporeality and the possibility of turning some of that in a more political way to our understanding of embodied difference. ... [This involves] thinking a lot about the history of optics and visibility, about the visualization and observation of racial difference over a long period of time.

Embodiment

Much of what I have drawn attention to thus far has concerned embodiment. The production of the effect of identity, the effect (and affect) of various modes of affiliation, is an embodied process. But how is the body implicated within the historical complex? How is the incorporation to be understood? Many of the articles mentioned are necessarily about embodiment, through considerations of mimesis or passing or specific sites of embodied practices, looking variously at the processes of incorporation, at questions of technologies and at the issues of the circumscribed or constitutive limitations of such processes. Through her focus on the terms ‘subject, psyche, agency’ Lois McNay addresses the issue of embodiment, in part by highlighting Butler’s recent reference in *Excitable Speech* (1997) to Bourdieu’s arguments. The performative power of the illocutionary act rests upon prior conventions such that the ‘moment’ of performativity is ‘a condensed historicity’, in Butler’s words, that ‘exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of past and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance’. McNay argues that the radical historicity of symbolic structures (again I think of Fanon here – ‘and above all historicity’ – describing the visual politics of the historico-epidermal schema) is central to understanding the notion of resignification in Butler. However, McNay argues, to seek out a notion of political agency at this point is to be disappointed. Converging with Ahmed’s position, McNay questions resignification as inherently subversive, seeing in Butler an underestimation of the ‘systematic recuperation of seemingly radical gestures’. Her direction is different from Ahmed’s, as she turns to the theorization of the psyche in Butler in order to argue that it is there is a crucial possibility of non-correspondence between hegemonic norms and symbolic identification that although figured in predominantly negative terms of constraint in Butler, can equally be emphasized as creative. Both innovation and sedimentation, McNay argues, through Ricoeur, are important in the

process of thinking these questions, and especially in reaching for her socio-theoretical aim, which is to be able to speak of the performative constitution of the subject in relation to social and historical changes.

Probyn's contribution takes a rather different approach to the question of embodiment, posing her questions on the level of changing ethical regimes, and focusing on food, and food/sex, drawing the discussion of incorporation onto the site of 'corporeal ethics'. Decentering 'sex' as a privileged site of thinking identity and ethics, Probyn turns attention to notions of food preparation as forms of sociality, with all the connotations that that has in terms of differentiating between as well as bringing together, but more than this, as forms of self-constitutive ritually embodied practice. Food and cooking, as practices of the care of the self and sites of social connection, may offer a route to thinking corporeal ethics in such a way as to stress that the 'delicacy and restraint' that go into cookery might well serve well in thinking an ethics of existence.

Routes

Probyn's wider project has a strong Deleuzian debt, and here she evokes the image of the rhizome to introduce the sense in which she is following the idea of the 'alimentary-sexual' regime. The link she makes with Arjun Appadurai's writings on food emphasizes that although there is something that makes food universal, the routes that food moves through means that it cannot be understood without its specific cultural and social contexts. The Deleuze–Appadurai connection is one that he himself makes in the interview presented here, where he responds to a question about the shared concern he has with Gilroy in routes and movement by stressing the complexities of global movements and argues that understandings of spatiality have to be able to capture those complexities. The rhizome has been an important analogy here, conveying as it does an image of movement that can come to temporary rest in new places while maintaining ongoing connections elsewhere. Appadurai adds to it a second Deleuzian notion, that of the fold, to describe his notion of implosion, formulated in part as a reaction to the implicit celebration of globalization in theoretical work. He explains:

[What] I'm struggling with especially in relation to the work I'm doing on violence – and I can only draw on geological ideas here – is the way that smaller spaces are being deformed by the pressure of the others. That pressure makes certain kinds of cities not just violent but violent in certain ways. What I want to talk about is the folding in of national violence, partition and so on, into cities in very concrete ways, so that that in Bombay, for example, one street 'is' Pakistan, to put it crudely. You have to see that both spaces and subjectivities have been deformed in the technical sense, because things are folded in, so the implosion idea is trying to catch that phenomenon without falling into the use of metaphors that are too biological or too organic . . . language is limited.

The concern that Appadurai expresses here is, again, one that is at its most broad, about 'belonging'. In the cultural anthropologist's hands, this is also necessarily a question that is tied to spatiality. Attention to where connections are, however rhizomatically, made, and attention to which spaces these connections are made 'across', in different ways unites several of the articles here. The spaces of the city that are resignified and reshaped according to the forms of belonging that are performed and permitted there is relevant to Fortier's concern with the constitution of diasporic belongings around certain sites, as it is to Fraser's concerns with the making visible of identities, such as the visibility that has been made more possible for gay people within certain areas and public spaces in cities, or to Bhatt's attention to political and religious discourses of belonging and their retracings of the relationship between belonging and place.

The articles collected here represent some of the most innovative directions of thought in this area. They represent a concern with advancing theoretical and conceptual issues through testing the integrity of their theoretical analyses around specific questions or examples. They represent a politics that is ever vigilant against those ways of posing the relation between places and identities that have too readily sought to locate that relation between people and places, or people and their bodies, or people and history. They represent the scholarship that is demanded in order to make an intervention in the modes of thought available for tackling the complexity of the appearance of identities in our contemporary world.

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Vikki Bell is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College, University of London.