

[http://icg.harvard.edu/~lit105/Class\\_Dictionary/Performativity.htm](http://icg.harvard.edu/~lit105/Class_Dictionary/Performativity.htm)

## **Term: Performativity**

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### **Definition:**

Performativity is the process for individuals of repeating and mimicking societal markers of gender, which part of an overall theory that shows gender to be constructed. If gender is a performance, then there is no preexisting true or false identity by which to judge an individual's acts or traits.

In defining performativity, it is most important to distinguish it from expressivity. Expressivity implies that the features of the body, or the things that the body does, are expressions of something *\*within\** that body: an identity that people see coming *\*before\** its expressions. Performativity, on the other hand, implies that only after a body repeatedly appears certain ways or does certain things, in a mode consistent with, say, one or the other gender in a binary gender system, can that body be given a gender. Someone gave the short answer to the question "what's the difference?" in class, saying, "You're not wearing a dress because you're a woman, you're a woman because you're wearing a dress." The former would be the expressive mode, the latter the performative.

### **Example:**

Butler uses performativity, and ends her book with it, in order to answer her own critique of 1980s feminism with which she starts the book. That critique is that the stable category of "woman," the thing in whose interest feminism is working, in fact excludes and even oppresses those who don't fall into its definition of woman: "the internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes and constrains the very subjects' that it hopes to represent and liberate" (189). However, if gender is *\*performative\**, she proposes a different sort of political action. In order to attack those presumptions, fixations and constraints of gender, she, notes, "Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself" (186). Gender's performative nature can turn back on itself: when bodies perform gender incorrectly, when they make "gender trouble," then they attack the idea that gender performances must immediately follow from inborn genders, and therefore question the expressivity of gender.

### **Works Cited:**

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Great Britain: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1990.