

Language and Gender Identity as Performance

SESSION 5

- ▶ Sarah Salih, 2002. *Judith Butler*. Routledge.
- ▶ Available on Google Books
- ▶ https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Judith_Butler.html?id=v5Qn2KjrOwgC

p.40

- ▶ Her work 'expresses a willingness to engage politically with oppression and violence with whatever tools it takes, including the tools provided by the concept of identity.

Cont.

- ▶ 'One can see here a way in which Butler, perhaps the most iconic figure of queer performativity, has immersed herself in a deeply serious project to contest oppression and abuse from the perspective of ethical engagement: things matter, she says; its not some kind of game. (To be fair, she has always taken this position, but the exuberance of her earlier work means that this theme was consistently overlooked)'

Wikipedia: gender performativity

- ▶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_performativity
- ▶ Notice Nussbaum's comment and the date.
- ▶ Does Nussbaum mis-read Butler's work?

The Work of Judith Butler

- ▶ Butler draws on a very wide range of different theorists (Hegel, Freud, de Beauvoir, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida)
- ▶ Her style is very dense and allusive and can be hard to follow
- ▶ If you are interested in finding out more about her, read her most famous work *Gender Trouble* (1990), and perhaps Sara Salih's guide *Judith Butler* (2002)

Three important ideas from Butler:

- ▶ Gender is not something we are automatically born with, it is something we continually "perform"
- ▶ This means that we have to stop thinking of gender as a "natural" category
- ▶ But subversion of the gender order is possible

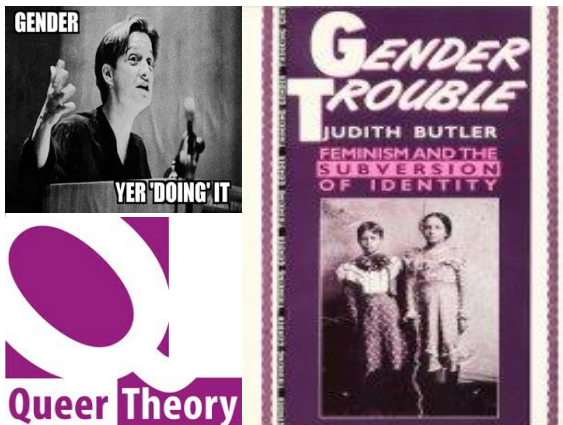
We tend to think of gender as natural:

- ▶ When babies are born, one of the first things we want to know is "boy or girl?"
- ▶ Whenever we fill in any kind of form, one of the first questions we're asked is "male or female?"
- ▶ As we grow up, we become very skilled at telling men from women

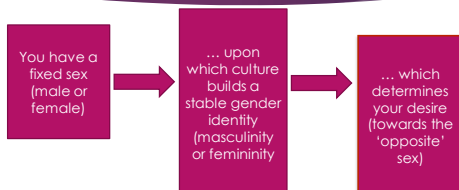


Gender/Sex Traditional View

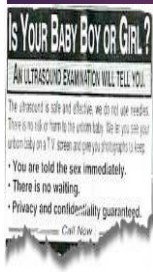
- ▶ Sex (male, female) is seen to cause gender (masculine, feminine) which is seen to cause desire (towards the other gender)
- ▶ Sex is a biological category; gender is a cultural/social category
- ▶ –A binary



Heteronormative Matrix



Butler: Critiques Binary



Disrupts dominant ideology

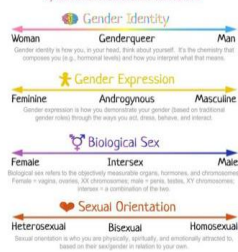
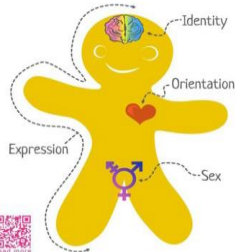
- ▶ Gender is not natural; socially constructed
- ▶ Also critiques the idea of biological sex as two separate groups (male/female)
- ▶ Biological sex is just as socially constructed as gender is
- ▶ Feminist discussions of men and women as separate groups

(women as one coherent group) serves to maintain the status quo:

- ▶ Dominated by the ideologies of
- ▶ Patriarchy
- ▶ Heterosexism

The Genderbread Person

by www.itsprouncedmetresexual.com



Butler: Shatters the Heteronormative Matrix

You have a body

You may perform an identity (or identities)

You may have desires

- Sex, gender and desire are flexible, free-floating and not 'caused' by other stable factors

Performativity

- Gender (along with sex and sexuality) is a performance
- It's what you do at particular times, rather than a universal *who you are*.
- Certain expressions of gender have seized a hegemonic hold (seen as natural)
- Gender, sex, desire are limited by 'regulative discourses' (Foucault)



J.L. Austin and Speech Act Theory

- When we speak, we don't just describe the world around us or convey ideas to each other.
- What we actually do is perform *acts* that bring about changes in the world.
- So when a vicar says "I now pronounce you man and wife" he is actually joining two people together legally.

Butler's Vision

► **view the action to**
the sex and gender system

- Proliferate genders, sexes, sexualities
- Change gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity.



way we continually perform gender:

"Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."



Performance

- Actors on a stage

Performativity

- If we take the subject position then how do we demonstrate that
 - - we perform it
 - - we (as society) police it.

Some other ways in which we might perform gender every day:

- ▶ Go to different toilets
- ▶ Present our faces differently
- ▶ Wear different clothes
- ▶ Have different hobbies
- ▶ Prefer different colours
- ▶ Have different names
- ▶ Do different things with our natural body hair
- ▶ Employ different body language
- ▶ Fancy different people
- ▶ Have different hair cuts
- ▶ Use language differently (?)

Performance versus Performativity

- ▶ People sometimes think that Butler is saying that gender is simply a matter of performance – with the implication that I could wake up tomorrow and decide to be a man
- ▶ What she is actually saying is that it is a matter of *performativity* – something that we often perform unconsciously, and which we don't have a completely free choice about
- ▶ We cannot exist outside the terms of gender

"gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed"

(*Gender Trouble*: p. 25)

"the subject" is not stable

- ▶ We construct our own identities through our actions every day
- ▶ The social world in which we live defines heterosexuality as "normal"
- ▶ We define ourselves in relation to others (so male against female)
- ▶ The social world sees sex as a binary opposition – you are either male or female

But is sex really binary?

"If you ask experts at medical centers how often a child is born so noticeably atypical in terms of genitalia that a specialist in sex differentiation is called in, the number comes out to about 1 in 1500 to 1 in 2000 births. But a lot more people than that are born with subtler forms of sex anatomy variations, some of which won't show up until later in life." (Alice Dreger)

Can gender be subverted?

- ▶ It can be argued, that by defining itself in opposition to homosexuality, heterosexuality actually calls homosexuality into being
- ▶ By acting outside of gender norms, individuals can call into question the "naturalness" of gender
- ▶ And some parodic gender performances highlight the disjunction between the body of the performer and the gender being performed (particularly "drag")

So the final message:

"If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (*Gender Trouble*: 136)

Which means that:

- ▶ We need to stop thinking that "man" and "woman" are natural categories
- ▶ Linguistic studies that seek to show how "men" and "women" use language are fundamentally flawed
- ▶ Instead, we need to think about how people perform their identities through language

- ▶ Longer Youtube – don't be fooled by the French introduction Butler speaks in English – although she is fluent both in French and German!
- ▶ <http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Youtube+Judith+Butler&FORM=VIRE7#view=detail&mid=37A9443F67C4FEC8D8D4437A9443F67C4FEC8D8D44>
