

Performing subjects, performing selves: the “truth” of sex, the impossibility of gender

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**PERFORMING SUBJECTS, PERFORMING SELVES: THE “TRUTH”
OF SEX, THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF GENDER**

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Abstract

Most perspectives on the postmodern subject revolve around the issue of sexuality and its relevance in the constitution of the subject. Irrespective of the definition we give to sexuality and its related representations on the human body, the critical genealogy of the political practices shows that, in gendering, the body needs to be accompanied by a theory of the psyche. This paper will focus on the intertwinings of political practice and gender constitution and identification, in order to account for a performative stance of the “I” in subjective experience.

Keywords: sexuality, performance, queer theory, Foucault, Lacan, Butler, subject, gender, heteronormative, submission, sexual difference.

The idea of this article stems from the fact that most of us are very keen on the distinction we mentally set between appearance and reality. What I eventually came to realize is that we all set a line between the two, but the way we draw it depends on how we’re constituted as subjects. As this is, to my mind, merely stating the obvious, I shall continue with an in-depth analysis of the way we actually perform the subject we represent to ourselves as “I”. In doing so, I will try to reconstruct the ways in which the postmodern subject can be thought of, by resorting to a deconstructive and genealogical approach. The main focus of the article will be then to highlight the possible interpretations of the subject and its identity, in terms of its sexuality, as presented in Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s work. Also, modern cultural practice has transformed the subject by questioning his or her autonomous status. This is why the boundaries of the individual seem to be blurred, erased and expanded constantly. Even if the subject is fragmented and his / her autonomy is thought of as illusory, we still need to keep in mind the importance of its psychic life.

First of all, there are two considerations that will configure the unfurl of the entire argument. Why should sexuality and, by extension, gender be considered fundamental for the constitution of the subject and its performative stances? Why sexuality and not an inner flying spaghetti monster? Tracing this

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back to Foucault, even the impression of interiority is politically constructed and determined by regulatory mechanisms. This basically implies there is no One or the Other and that the subject is politically determined by the strings of social and cultural significance handled by specifically directed knowledge-based discourse. There is only an individual who is the subject of political discourse and he or she is subjected to its schemes of representation. Biologically speaking, the discussion over the relevance of sex and sexuality in the interpretation of subjective experience can go as far back as the Freudian tradition in psychoanalysis. Pursuing this train of thought would however exceed the purpose of this paper, since it is based on causal explanations that make meaning out of the acts of the subject based mainly on biological sexual givens. Keeping in mind the cultural significance ascribed to gender roles, introduced by the feminist distinction between sex and gender, we could justify this choice by appealing to theories of the constitution of the subject² and its critics (Butler 1988, 519). We can even go back to gender's grammatical stance and its relevance in analyzing the antinomy between the masculine and the feminine in discourse (Kristeva 1982). This would account for the symbolic positioning of the feminine in discourse as seen in Luce Irigaray's writings (Okłowski 2000, 74-75).

Only the reference to these contexts leads to interesting conundrums on the way gender is represented and what gender is. This is why we should return to what seems to be the most basic point of encounter between sex and gender: the body³ (Abigail Bray; Claire Colebrook 1998, 35). Another reason for this would be that the earliest stances we assume in discourse are related, in one way or another, to sexuality and the way it is represented by hegemonic representational structures. In the discussion on individual dynamics, it seems obvious that one cannot talk about a subject outside its cultural context, this is why we need to explore the structures of social and cultural determinations that influence subjective experience (Frosh *et al.*, 2003). Also, assuming that preexisting socio-cultural representations offer the individual the possibility of choice between identities and binary categories, it seems necessary to determine if these categories are fundamental or merely operational and if interiorizing them is an actual choice. In this context, it is obvious that we cannot just talk about sex and its alleged truths, although that would be somewhat more

² Butler constructs a detailed account on possible ways to reinterpret the doctrine of constitution and acts theory. The becoming of the subject in gender is presented as a radical reinterpretation of the phenomenological approach to specific bodily acts.

³ One of the necessary consequences of the fact that the personal is political in feminist theory is a reinterpretation of the body as expressive, not as a mere (alienating) representation of the female body. This is actually the major point of convergence between Foucault's theory and the one Judith Butler develops, since it is considered to be the recipient of all regulatory practices and gender transformations

straightforward, or about what sexuality is. On the one hand, sex talks and their stereotypical constructs are the actual consequences of the political discourse in the deployment of alliance and sexuality in the past five centuries or so (Foucault, 1976). Just a glimpse of Foucault's work shows that. On the other hand, trying to define what sexuality is brings forward mainly the fact that it's a form of discourse, whether it is circulated knowledge or performance through stylized repetition. In other words, it cannot be identified specifically, for it has no identity in itself; outside discourse, that is. In short, there are 'identities' related to sexuality that are embedded in the subject through the authority of knowledge and power and transformations of the same representations through the acting out of the subject in everyday life.

I. The Truth of Sex

The focus on bodily representations as related to our sense of self, subjectivity and individuality does by no means negate the biological sexes or the factual reality of the body. John Fiske best describes the distinction between the humanistic idea of the autonomous individual who possesses the determining force over the course of his life as opposed to the post-structuralist subject by stating about the latter that "this is not to deny that we are all individuals, that is, that we inhabit different bodies with different and unique genetic structures, but it is to say that that part of us which forms our individuality is essentially biological, and does not, therefore, form a major part of the study of culture. What cultural studies are concerned with, of course, is the sense that various cultures make of 'the individual', and the sense of self that we, as individuals, experience. This constructed sense of the individual in a network of social relations is what is referred to as 'the subject'" (Fiske 1987, 48). That is to say that no matter of the interpretation we give to sexuality and gender, this will not change the fact that women give birth and men have greater muscular strength. This is a fact that cannot be denied. However, using it as a pretext to posit political hierarchies that create inequalities is illegitimate too. The sense of self, however, is modified by repetition of stylized acts (Butler 1988) and relations of power (Foucault 1976) that structure society in hierarchies in gendering the body.

Before we approach the matter of constituted subjects, methodological considerations are required. First of all, due to the importance of deconstruction (understood as a method to examine the production of truths, see Namaste, 1994) in framing the subject. Secondly, because queer theory, pioneered by Judith Butler is inspired by post-structuralist approaches and the historical construction of the sexed body as it constructs new identities as viable cultural possibilities. This is why a comparison between Foucault's method and the one Butler applies is needed, as it underlines the importance of psychic life in the

postmodern subject and will emphasize the fact that the gendered body is not merely cultural. Finally, because delimiting their approaches will offer insight on the way the cultural and the social logic are embedded in the subject.

The Production of Sex

For Foucault, the deployment of alliance and the one of sexuality are constructed historically. Here, sexuality is experimented desire and it is expressed in sexual pleasure. This is constantly orchestrated by authority, by political power and its practices. In this case, even if some aspects of sexuality are constantly performed, assuming a position in discourse will still done by reference to hegemonic cultural representations. As he examines the structuring of sexuality, a critique of the repressive hypothesis emerges first (Foucault 1976). The point he makes is that sexuality is not at all tabooed, even in Victorian society. His genealogical approach explains how the medical discourse, sustained by the development of judicial institutions, create the knowledge base of the sexed body. Sexuality is therefore produced through discourse, not repressed, nor censored. In this sense, for an identity to exist, it needs to be present in discourse. If something is not conceptualized in discourse, we cannot fully account for it. This is not to say that whatever is excluded from discourse does not exist. The example of the homosexual is most relevant in this case and it is exponential for the double function of discourse. That is to say, the silencing of certain categories, the exclusion from the abilitated lines of hetero-normative discourse (for an analysis on the able heterosexual body, see McRuer 2003, 80), done by political authorities and the clergy, is what actually creates the "homosexual". Even if medical discourse asserts the "perversity" of this category, its mere presence in discourse is an attempt to define it and opens the possibility to contest conventional representations of it. This type of constructing the homosexual identity engenders a paradox, as Diana Fuss points out (Fuss 1991, 1-10), since the notion of the closet came along with the political struggle for recognition of civil rights. The assertion of one's own homosexual or bisexual orientation or transgendered identity comes along with two other assumptions, central to the dominant heteronormative discourse: heterosexuality as central to it and the silencing of other identities. The acting out of one's own identity is made inside current conceptions of sexuality, we cannot merely stated that we are outside heteronormative discourse, even if we resist it, since the heterosexual and homosexual stances are interdependent and we cannot find meaning in either of the terms without examining them as a binary opposition. In other words, we are faced with the discursive production of homosexual subjectivity and its position in social and

cultural logic, started by disciplinary technologies (Dreyfus, Rabinow 1984,) and continued by media representations (Miller 1991; Doty 1993).

Performance of Sexuality

Butler makes the same point, but the other way around. Her approach is ontological (Butler 1990, 1993). As one cannot have the concept of “raw” before having experienced something that is cooked, one cannot have an account of heterosexuality before having knowledge of homosexual practices. In this sense, every gender representation is derived from the illusion of identity of substances, present in language through assimilation of fictitious unities, considering that persons cannot be positioned in language without the mark of gender. The antinomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality creates stereotypes, but they are not based on an accumulation of ideas based on some identifiable pattern, but on social relations between individuals that have specific representations, fossilized in institutional contexts. Assuming that all individuals are hypnotized by a specular representation of the self (Lacan, 1933), it seems obvious that we rally to whatever we have in front of us as it projects us as recognizable persons. This is why institutional practices that sustain heteronormativity configure the male and the female through the same operational artifice present in establishing the gender of nouns. But whilst in language sex is fictitious and is ascribed by arbitrary convention, the discourse of sexuality cannot be structured in the same way, for it would create compelling and compulsory social fictions about sex and gender, male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality. Nevertheless, this is what happened in the binary opposition system of genders created through positing heterosexuality as the necessary relation between male and female. Understanding gender this way assumes a causality between sex, gender and desire. It actually suggests that the directed sexual desire expresses one’s gender identity and the other way around, that gender identification can be derived only from manifesting sexual desire towards what is different as biological sex. These are the main naturalizing and normative practices of heterosexuality. While Foucault suggests that even the category of sex is constructed through the condition of sexuality, assuming thus a causality between sex and its tactical production, led by strategic objectives of the mechanism of production. This is not to say that his analysis falls into the same causal explanations that the feminist theory critics (Irigaray, Braidotti, Diprose), but it reflects the fact that he hypostasizes sexual desire, behavior and experience as the effect, as the accidental attributes that surface over the years and that characterize sexual identity as a regulatory and compulsory fiction of cultural and political hierarchy (Butler, 1993). That is to say that his account is still bound to the body as bodily image. Foucault traces

the normative ordering of these attributes into coherent sequential categories of gender. What undermines the existence of the categories and pinpoints their fictitious foundation are the attributes that do not fall within sequential or causal models of intelligibility. That is to say, gender and sex are "produced" along culturally determined lines of coherence, but its materialization in the embodied subject comes along with the performance of a specific representation. As a matter of fact, as Butler states bluntly, "there is no gender identity aside from gender's expressive stances" (Butler, 1993). In short, the representations on gender are the effect of whatever we express when we identify ourselves with some attributes through performative acquirement. The performative stance of the subject is somewhat present in Foucault vision of power as well. Considering that he discusses not only the prohibitive function of power, but its productive function as well, we can see that power and sexuality are coextensive. In this sense, sexuality is not a mere copy of the representations of juridical and medical discourse that define it, but these configurations of sexuality also create and redefine the models of cultural intelligibility.

II. The Impossibility of Gender

By showing that the becoming into gender of a subject is a transformational historical process, Butler emphasizes the importance and inescapability of embodiment as a fluid construct, the site of potential, rather than a fixed given (Butler, 1998, 1993). The active incorporation of representations can be thought of processually in terms of introjection (Rose, 1986) or fluidity (Grosz, 1994, Brennan, 1996), disseminating by doing so the fictitious regulatory character of the dichotomy between the dominant representations and the ones ascribed to femininity as excluded (Butler, 1993; Brennan, 1996), maternal or abject in its configuration (Kristeva, 1982; Kelly, 1993, Stone, 1983; Creed, 1999). That is to say, corporeality and its gendered/sexed aspect are not to be reduced in terms of representation at compulsory and restrictive configurations that are transmitted socially and culturally. The confinement of gender's performative fluidity to such a static dimension disregards the fact that bodies and their significations are aspects of ongoing practices of negotiation, reformation and encounter. In short, one needs to take into account the fact that the existence of multiple identities related to gender constantly questions the alleged stable, masculine stances. By doing so, it produces configurations that conflict, converge or are dissonant with the mechanisms of control designed to obstruct the basic intuition that there can be no model of truth and validity applicable to gender. This is why the debate on the meaning of gender seems to be relevant only in linguistic contexts, considering that its significance for the constituted

subject (Braidotti 1989, 102) can be found only through its performative expressions (Butler 1988, 526; 1993, 30).

In the entire process of comprehending this introjective process, by analyzing its performative positive aspect, we are confronted with the possibility of a metaphorical understanding of subjectification, which goes beyond any symbolic order one might think of. Butler's critique (Butler 1988, 530) towards Foucault is directed at the fact that his writing is still confined to the representative, and, might I add, repressive, historical context, its causes and effects, without discussing the subject's position in this mechanism and without offering a positive account of its capacity to act. The prescription to describe the subject as a performative agent in gender is not utopian, it is merely a recognition of the limits of language and its effects on discourse. The assertive character of a specific psychic energy related to the subject and its positioning in discourse is derived, seemingly, from her affiliation to Lacanian thinking.

Although the psychoanalytical dimension is not the major point of discussion here and cannot be fully accounted for in this last section due to lack of space, it is at least revealing for what should follow in analyzing the postmodern subject as a performing self. Therefore, I will not conclude on this essay in a stereotyped manner, by stating once more what I clarified throughout the arguments above, but I will end by outlining the positive aspects of configuring the subject in such a way, without being dismissive of its psychological dimension. By assuming there is a metaphorical stance that can be ascribed to the performance of the subject, by appealing to Lacanian logics, including concepts such as the symbolic order and the imaginary constructs it fosters, we are immersed in the area of significance, not only of meaning. Even if Butler's account of Lacan cannot be used in therapy and cannot be fully taken into account by psychoanalysis (Campbell 2001, 35-37), it can neither be dismissed as a psychoanalytical aberration, as Copjec sometimes does (Copjec 1994, 210). Rather, her analysis on psychic excess should be seen as a continuation of Foucault's critical genealogy and as a way of pointing out the importance of the interpretations that can be ascribed to collective representations in a subject that breathes, lives, walks, in a word, performs. In short, performance should be viewed as significant for the constitution of the subject. It is not realized only by being subjected to external determinations, but also by being the subject of what one does, thinks and is. This is not to say that, by performing different identities, we are able to configure our own subjects. Butler bluntly states that there will always be something that escapes the alleged natural categories, as "identity cannot be fully totaled by the symbolic, for what it fails to order will emerge in the imaginary as a disorder, a site where identity is contested" (Butler 1997, 97), but that it will help us see these categories as merely operational one. In this sense, gender has no meaning, but it is significant.

Acknowledging this and its importance for the performing subject is what enables us to underscore the fact that the distinction between appearance and reality is merely fictitious, apparent, might I add, and that it doesn't fully account for the fact that in our 'being somebody', we are performing ourselves. In any case, any analysis on the subject should be complemented by a theory on the its psychic dimension and its performative acts to be able to account fully for the constitution of the fragmented subject through relations of power. In short, we need to start thinking what determines us to draw a line in the first place between what seems to be out there and what actually is.

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