

The Question of Power and Authority in Gender Performance: Judith Butler's Drag Strategy

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Once I went through a border with a drag queen, who was
dressed butch to
Pass as a man.
I was dressed femme to pass as a girl
They pulled us over and wanted to see our suitcases.
So we switched suitcases.
He got my suitcase, with suits and ties and letters to girls.
And I got his suitcase with dresses and high heels and poems
to boys.
They passed us through as normal.

(P. Shaw cited in Senelick, 2000, p.490)

So I thought I'd carry another woman's eggs for her. I don't
mean I had a market stall. No, for lesbian couples who
couldn't have children, I had eighteen babies in a period of
three years. I was prolific, I had to have me pelvic floor
laminated. (L. Savage, 2006)

Debates surrounding drag have proved controversial within feminist thought. When drag queens first emerged as proud symbols of the gay liberation movement, many felt a need to distance themselves from what, as they saw it, was a mocking of women. Although drag drew on the transparent performance of gendered imagery to challenge stereotypes of gender and sexuality, those performances were (and continue to be) defined primarily by male mastery of the depiction of highly selective feminine identities that focus on surface aesthetics (hair, clothing, make-up) rather than social narratives of family or reproduction. Consequently, feminist criticism has critiqued drag as the reproduction of a specifically sexualized rendering of feminine identity, which reflects persistent hierarchies of desire and desirability: of men dressing as the male-oriented version of women. In other words, drag performs and sustains forms of femininity which primarily

serve patriarchal interests. As such, discussions of drag have marked the cutting-edge between feminist and queer theoretical discourse.

Judith Butler's discussion in *Gender Trouble* (1990, pp.79-149) aroused much controversy by politicising drag as a postmodern tool with which to radically reassess universalized and reductionist feminist thought. Although Butler's subsequent works, notably *Bodies That Matter* (2004), have qualified that reliance on drag as the prime example of performative gender, her original claims provide the strongest argument for drag as a transgressive strategy. By revisiting Butler's earlier claims for drag, I want to argue that the feminist discomfort surrounding drag's claim to transgression stems from drag's role in sustaining retrogressive power hierarchies, which in turn directs critical attention to the reiterative persistence of underlying binaries, that is to say, socially created gender dichotomies. Drag's failure to escape from existing gender binaries illustrates the persistence of power hierarchies within which that attempt takes place.

Butler's theory will be broken down into four broad themes to form the structure of the discussion: the disintegration of the subject, the creation of new narratives, the denaturalization of the body and the breakdown of compulsory heterosexuality. I argue that Butler's assumption that drag exposes the instability of the subject needs to be scrutinized; not any drag will do. Butler's analysis of drag fails to take fully into account the actualities and consequences of the binary hierarchy of power. Leading from this contention, I argue that drag can create a greater space within feminist discourse for creation of progressive gender norms, but that this is by no means certain. Drag is ambiguous in its meaning, expression and consequences; a laissez-faire attitude towards gender expression should not be taken. On that basis, I offer a recognition of drag's work in bringing the body back into feminist discourse, but argue that the female body should not become obscured by its parody. Finally, I want to assert that drag can be

useful in critiquing compulsory heterosexuality, but with the proviso that drag should not simply be used to colonize female sexuality. Throughout these explorative sections runs an argument for a qualified acceptance of drag as a transgressive strategy, alongside the recognition that this strategy is influenced by gender hierarchies which affect the material lives of humans gendered as women. Drag can, and does, fail to transcend oppressive norms at times, as it cannot escape its context. Drag does, however, expose the need to accept in all feminist strategies the diversity and plurality of female gendered, classed, racial and sexualized experience.

The integrity of the subject under interrogation

One of Butler's claims is that central elements of second wave feminism make too concrete the unstable category of *woman*. Through the promotion of the female gender as socially constructed, feminists began to ask what was involved in creating a woman. For example, feminists such as Gilligan (1982) wrote of a conception of women as developing through mothering and a greater capacity for morality and empathy. Postmodernist feminists (Butler, 1990; Flax, 1987) have criticized this strand of feminist theory by pointing out, firstly, that by defining what constitutes a woman, the theorists are merely replacing Enlightenment thought with their own brand of foundationalist truths surrounding the integrity of the subject *woman* and, secondly, that by creating inside and outside spaces, where only the outside (gender) can be deconstructed, but the inside (sex) is essentialized, sexual binaries remain out of reach of transformation. Butler uses drag to problematize these assumptions and provide the possibility of transgressing gender categories and sex/gender binaries.

The argument against the integrity of the subject runs along the following lines. Gender is constructed through a 'stylized repetition of acts' which 'founds and consolidates the subject' (Butler, 1990, p.140). Butler challenges the notion of a presumptive 'I' that does its gender, a

presumption Beauvoir (1953) is making when she posits that *one* becomes a 'woman' (Beauvoir, S. cited in Butler, 1990, p.141). For Butler, there is no original subject behind gender expressions, no performer behind the mask of performance: the 'I' only emerges through performative gender relations (2004, p.338). By providing a pastiche of repeated gender actions, drag 'mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity' (Butler, 1990, p.137). Drag dramatizes and makes explicit mundane, everyday gender rituals and, through this repetition of gendered actions, suggests that essentialist presumptions about correct or authentic genders can be reworked (Butler, 1990, p.338); the sight of a person with male genitalia reproducing femininity makes apparent the social mechanisms of gender oppression so that an audience can see its workings. By parodying a gender performance with no original, drag questions the 'ontological integrity of the subject' *woman* as authentic and essential (Butler, 1990, p.325). If identity is constructed through a compulsory repetition, then drag's transgressive quality can be seen 'within the possibility of a variation on that repetition' (Butler, 1990, p.145). Drag can be read as a disloyalty to traditional gender expressions, thereby denying claims of the essential nature of gender.

This disloyal repetition of authentic identity can be seen in a number of drag performances. Butler opens her chapter on drag in *Gender Trouble* (1990) with description of Greta Garbo. Garbo is viewed within the gay community as high camp (Newton, 1979, p.103); a drag act of sorts. She is uber-femme, beyond any naturalistic portrayal of femininity. As such, she uses gender icons and signifiers to show up 'authentic' feminine performance as just that, a performance. Equally, the camped-up portrayals of masculinity in gay culture - the cowboy, the sailor - denaturalize more ordinary portrayals of masculinity and confuse notions of authenticity in judging gender expressions (Edwards, 1994, p.49). Butler uses the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), which tells the stories of various

participants of underground Drag Balls in New York in the late 1980s, to provide examples of performances which confuse and transcend gender norms. The petite Venus Xtravaganza passes easily for a young white woman; she can reproduce femininity with ultra realness (a term used within the drag ball community to signify the ability to represent very closely a particular gender image) and yet is officially the wrong sex, thereby confusing the notion of a correct or authentic sex.

Drag thus pulls biological sex into the gendered gaze; 'drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic spaces' (Butler, 1990, p.137). Traditionally, what is outside – appearance, sex role – has been separated from what is inside – essence, genital sex. Butler argues that this is a false distinction and that female impersonators point out its arbitrary nature. A character from the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* provides a useful study in exploring this idea: Yitzhak is biologically female but dresses as a man, thus hir (outside) appearance or sex role is masculine but hir (inside) essence or sex is female. One day s/he gets a job as a drag queen and s/he begins to dress as a woman, thus hir (outside) appearance becomes female but it is made clear that hir (inside) essence remains male. Drag's affect is thus to 'wrench the sex roles loose from that which supposedly determines them, that is, genital sex' (Newton, 1979, p.103). Transgender debates are at the forefront of the political battle to make gender less dependent on anatomy. Recently in New York, a law was amended to allow people to alter the sex on their birth certificate without having to have sex-change surgery (Cave, 2001). In this very concrete way, drag is proving itself to be a transgressive strategy to break down rigid gender categories.

Butler's use of drag to destabilize an emphasis on the subject has become the focus of a variety of critiques. For some, taking Butler's theories to their end-point leaves the feminist project without a protagonist and hence at a dead-end. Postmodernism is accused of 'deconstructing everything and refusing to construct anything' (Alcoff cited in Nicholson, 1992, p.62) in the

way that it dissolves the identity of *woman* into the gendered expressions which create it and does not give back any base from which to launch practical political action. Benhabib (1995) worries that, if there is nothing behind our gender performance, we will never have the agency to initiate political change. However, these theorists potentially stand open to charges of essentialism as they attempt to define who is a woman and who is not.

Perhaps a more nuanced riposte to Butler's argument that drag can confuse gender oppression can be found in the writing of bell hooks (1992). She argues that there are power relations at work within a patriarchal society which affect the way we should view drag, namely that: 'To choose to appear as "female" when one is male is always constructed...as a loss, as a choice worthy only of ridicule' (hooks, 1992, p.145). She follows Butler in analysing *Paris is Burning* but presents a radically different interpretation. hooks sees the drag performances represented in the documentary as sustaining gender and racial oppression through the formulation of white, affluent femininity as the 'holy grail' of what it means to be a woman. As hooks argues, the 'combination of class and race longing that privileges the "femininity" of the ruling-class white women...does not provide a critique of patriarchy' (1992, p.147). Power is always at play, and recognition of this is evident in some of the testimonials from the drag queens in the documentary themselves. One experienced drag queen commented that he would never become a woman: 'just cause you get a pussy, don't mean life's going to be great' (*Paris is Burning*, 1990). This view reflects an acknowledgement that to live in the world as a woman means a certain loss of power (hooks, 1992, p.145). This point is also made by Harper (1994) who points out that the drag queens in *Paris is Burning* found it very hard to alter their fundamental social experiences outside the drag ball context. Butler's subversion can be seen as rather a limited rebellion which fails to subvert economic and material identities or change social actualities.

Examples can be found in the analysis of drag to support the counter argument that drag fails to transgress traditional, patriarchal gender norms. Butler assumes that, when Venus Xtravaganza was murdered, she was killed for being transgendered. Another interpretation could be that Venus was killed for being a woman. Posing this interpretation highlights the danger that Butler's conception of drag may obscure the gendered and raced oppression that women experience through their less-favoured position in society. In Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* (1979) it is interesting to note that, off-stage, the more 'high-end' drag queens were rather conservative, middle-class men who usually kept their boxers on underneath their female clothing as a sign that they were still men *in costume*. In a sense, then, these drag queens fail to meaningfully represent femininity, as female gender is also constructed through the concrete social experience of being on the losing end of the power duality in society. hooks argues persuasively when she states that 'donning women's clothes displays no love or identification with women' but instead is a 'cynical mockery' (1992, p.147). When analysing drag, one has to be aware of the power relations that lie behind and within the performance which may lead to an amplification of gender oppression rather than a transgression of gender categories, something that Butler's early account of drag fails to do.

A Dizzying Accumulation of Narratives

So far, it has been accepted that identity politics can be universalizing and reductionist, but that drag also has the capacity to be gender oppressive and should always be analysed with the effects of material social experiences in mind. We now move on to explore another strand of Butler's theory: that by making ontological judgements about which genders should be considered authentic, one is perpetrating a form of 'dehumanising violence' upon genders which are considered bogus (Butler, 2004, p.217). To live 'outside' the culturally acceptable boundaries of gender is a dangerous business, as

can be seen in the lives of drag queens as described by Newton, documented in *Paris is Burning* and fictionalized in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. She argues that past feminist theory has ‘created unity only through a strategy of exclusion’ (Butler, 2004, p.206) by failing to see gender as only one identity among many others such as race, class, ethnicity, age and sexuality. This excludes women who do not identify themselves as women in the terms set out by feminist theory from other cultural positions (Butler, 1990a, p.325). Butler asserts that, by confusing gender norms, drag has the effect of ‘proliferating gender configurations’ (1990, p.146) and works to challenge the idea that it is only through the materialization of a coherent sex that one becomes culturally viable.

The lives of drag queens are symbols of the fantastic variety of gender identity which exists in the world. The disidentification displayed proudly by drag queens can, in Butler’s eyes, facilitate a reconceptualization of gender (Butler, 1993, p.2). The moving image of Hedwig (the drag queen protagonist of the *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* who has neither a vagina nor penis) walking naked into the distance at the end of the film leaves the audience with the message that s/he is neither man nor woman and that this is okay. In another study of drag queens, *When the Girls are Men* (Taylor and Rupp, 2005), Sushi, a long time drag queen, talks about the fact that, after passing for a while as a woman, she realized that wanting to wear women’s clothes did not mean she wanted to be a woman: it meant she wanted to be a drag queen. This recognition is eloquently summarized in the novel *Stone Butch Blues* by a fictional butch who had sex realignment to become a man:

I simply became a he – a man without a past. Who was I now – woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked. (Feinberg cited in Raymond, 1996, p.220)

Drag challenges the audience to accept gender diversity just as Butler prompts feminists to discard the category of *woman* in order to include in their theories ‘the array of embodied beings culturally positioned as women’ (Butler, 1990a, p.325). As Heyes (2003) argues, feminism needs to speak to and be spoken by more subjects than just men and women; there are a multitude of other identities such as bisexual, lesbian, gay, transsexual, transgender which all need to be engaged in political liberation. It is argued by Taylor and Rupp (2005) that drag can play a role in transgressing the punitively policed gender binary. They conducted focus groups with audience members at drag acts and asked them what they had taken away from the show. Many people felt that the labels ‘gay’, ‘straight’, ‘female’, ‘male’ didn’t fit drag queens; there was a recognition of a transgression of these traditional distinctions. One audience member commented: ‘the drag queens opened my eyes and my heart to the myriad of people that fill this earth’ (Taylor and Rupp, 2005, p.2136). Drag clearly plays a part in building the number of visible subjects which do not fit into established male/female distinctions and, therefore, its performances provide a transgressive strategy towards allowing for a greater variety of positions to be articulated.

We cannot, however, take all gender expressions as equal. As hooks (1992, p.147) argues, the fact that white upper-class femininity is privileged in *Paris is Burning* undermines the transgressive quality of the performance. There is a need to retain critical awareness of material actualities when exploring the way gender is expressed through drag, in order to analyse whether the new narratives accumulated are transgressive or whether they simply perpetuate gendered and raced oppression. As Heyes argues, it is unhelpful to have a *laissez-faire* account of gender, as this ignores the fact that some gender expressions hold stigmatized conceptions of women in place (2003, p.1096). There is a need to be more discerning about different types of drag when analysing it as a transgressive strategy. The humour expressed in many mainstream drag acts (Dame Edna Everage, RuPaul, Lily

Savage) is conservative and presents an image of women which is stereotypical to the point of insult. The light entertainer Lily Savage's act includes lines such as 'I'm sick of fellas. Think I'll become a lesbian. At least you get to wear flat shoes' (Geocities, 2006). Savage's act does not create space for progressive narratives, but is in fact conforming entirely to chauvinist and elitist representations of a working-class woman. Savage's presentation emphasizes selective feminine identities (big hair, short skirt, loud mouth) and hence his mocking replication reinforces classed and gendered stereotypes of women. Savage is not asking anyone to question the labels they apply to people or their conceptions of real and unreal genders, s/he is simply asking them to laugh at the idea of a man in ridiculous female clothing; in short, Savage is a clown, not a pioneer.

Drag has the capacity to illustrate how limiting discussion of gender to the binaries male and female is oppressive, but these same gender binaries can be perpetuated and confirmed by drag. Here again, we have come to an acceptance of the ambiguities raised by drag, but also a recognition that those ambiguities are qualified by the inability to escape gender hierarchy, even among drag queens.

The body as a battleground

The body has often presented as 'prior to signification' (Butler, 1990, p.130), but drag illuminates the body and calls it 'disputed territory'. The body ceases to be a passive, natural surface upon which gender meaning is inscribed and instead becomes a site for 'denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself' (Butler, 1990, p.146). Butler uses drag as evidence that the sexed body is not a natural entity, but only becomes sexed as part of a discourse, or in Butler's words, 'through a series of exclusions and denials' (1990, p.135). Drag becomes political through the body; it disorders the imposition of cultural coherence onto bodies. That the body is a site of contention is made clear in the debate

surrounding the physical body of drag queens described by Taylor and Rupp (2005). A local drag queen had breast implants and subsequently spent most of hir shows bare breasted. This provoked anger from some in the local drag community who claimed s/he had ceased to be a gender-bender and had become a 'tittie queen' and nothing but a 'sex kitten' to the audience (Taylor and Rupp, 2005, p.2137). It was argued that the only way s/he could now make a political statement was through the exposure of hir male genitalia. Drag derives subversiveness from a mismatch between sex role and genital sex: the disordering of bodily coherence. By having breast implants, the drag queen was undermining the political statement made by drag: you do not have to have the body of a woman to be gendered as a woman. Another drag queen from the community commented 'a drag queen is somebody who knows he has a dick and two balls' (Taylor and Rupp, 2005, p.2120).

So drag can be a transgressive strategy that works to make the female body politically relevant and denaturalized, but in its eagerness to do so, we might pose the question, does drag actually obscure the materiality of the body and thus create new ways to oppress women's bodies? Biddy Martin remarks that Butler 'fails to make the body enough of a drag on signification' (1994, p.110). By this, she means that the body is more concrete and significant than Butler takes account of. Butler expects the body to be infinitely flexible, but the body still has an incredible hold upon sex role, even within drag culture. Newton (1979) talks of how important a part of the drag queens' costumes breasts are, the phrase 'shows up' often being replaced by 'tits up' (1979, p.102). Senelick (2000) tells of how, in drag performance, nakedness is about the removal of stigma and that the body in this sense symbolizes natural basic humanity: 'In drama, particularly with a gay theme, the display of the penis is now the token of authenticity' (Senelick 2000, p.495). Drag may not move us any further away from the essentialization of the sexed body, as Butler wishes.

Further, Martin worries that, by viewing the female body as plastic, 'queer sexuality projected onto the female body becomes its own trap' and, as a consequence, 'operations of misogyny disappear from view' (1994, p.109). To elaborate, Martin's suggestion is that, as the female body becomes a site of inscribed meaning and parody, the actualities of power that act upon the feminine body to give it its form and significance may become obscured. Bordo offers a similar argument in her article 'Gay Men's Revenge' (1999), through an analysis of commercial images of feminised men. She claims that the aesthetics of masculinity are changing to become more feminine; gay men are *doing femme* better than many women. Butler might view this as a transgressive step, but Bordo takes a different interpretation, arguing that these images are colonizing femininity and are putting even greater pressure on both men and women to trim and preen their bodies towards 'perfection'. A striking analogy for these ideas is found in *Paris is Burning* when you see a ball participant teaching a class full of young New York women how to walk and conduct themselves like catwalk models. Although the politicisation of the body through drag can be used as a transgressive strategy, it is important that this process does not work to obscure, or more worryingly perpetuate, the current impositions on women's bodies.

Disordering Compulsory Heterosexuality

An important function of drag, and the final one to be discussed here, is its ability to 'challenge compulsory heterosexuality and its central protagonists "man" and "woman"' (Butler, 1990, p.136). Compulsory heterosexuality is established within society through the opposition of masculine and feminine; men are masculine, and so can only desire females, who are necessarily feminine and thus any situation where desire does flow from biological sex, and hence the 'correct' gender, is ruled out. Or, as Butler puts it: 'enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing

gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality' (1990, p.136). The second wave feminist promotion of a continuous line between sex and gender maintains this dual matrix and thus 'conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual and gay and lesbian contexts' (Butler, 1990a, p.337). Sex is not binary, as Flax (1987) illustrated through her critique of the traditional feminist emphasis on female sexuality as an expression of male domination that leaves other forms of sexual experience inexplicable.

By confusing gender distinctions, drag undermines the assumption that desire derives from gender and sex in such a restrictive manner. For instance, Taylor and Rupp tell of how drag queens got people up on-stage and asked them if they were 'cocksuckers' or 'pussylickers'. In using terms which usually refer to same-sex sexual acts, the drag queens 'mobilized a thinking of what those categories mean' (Taylor and Rupp, 2005, p.2121), uniting and dividing peoples' sexuality in a way different from that allowed under compulsory heterosexuality. Performers of drag challenge the audience to categorize their sexuality; drag's transgressive quality can be seen in the audiences' failure to do so. A statement from a drag king is illuminating: 'straight women are afraid of us, straight men don't know *what* to do with us and gay men are frustrated because they can't have us' (Senelick, 2000, p.494). The drag queens documented in *Paris is Burning* transgressed sexual binaries in another important way. Through the establishment of protective and sustaining 'Houses', they created new forms of 'community' and facilitated a resignification of the family. This clears a path for new relational norms and ways of organizing society that do not follow binary fault-lines.

Raymond (1996) provides a critique of this interpretation of drag. She argues that drag is not about transgressing sexual binaries, but is merely a further conformity to sex roles; in short, drag is about turning other men on. She points out that the number of transgendered people using hormones

and having breast implants is rising and she attributes this to a desire to appear attractive to men as ultra feminine women (Raymond, 1996, p.216). Drag, then, ceases to be a transgressive strategy and becomes instead about the appropriation of female sexuality. For some ball participants in *Paris is Burning*, becoming physically more like a woman did seem to be aspired to and this was linked-into becoming more sexually attractive to men. Hence, drag distances itself from women, as its engagements are exclusively male. However, Butler recognizes this criticism and replies to it by comparing the argument to saying that butch lesbianism is just the displacement and appropriation of men (Butler, 1993, p.127). She therefore exposes Raymond's critique as simply re-inscribing the heterosexual matrix. In summary, drag can be an important transgressive strategy to disorder compulsory heterosexuality within society, although we do have to be aware of how far drag is creating new avenues of desire or simply generating new forms of homosexual desire.

Conclusion

Drag can be performed so as to illuminate the 'transferability of the attribute' *woman* and thus to liberate women from this oppressive category (Butler, 2004, p.214). Just as easily, however, drag can be performed so as to mock this category, amplifying and re-instating its defining features. Through an initial argument that the subject is unstable, but that power imbalances are still relevant when exploring identity, I have argued that drag can contribute to the elevation of progressive gender expressions. However, I recognize that not all gender expressions are equal. Therefore, the claim that drag can politicize the body is bordered by awareness of the potentially regressive impact of that process on the material female body. Similarly, an understanding of the reflexive and recursive quality of drag indicates that transgressive confusion of the binary system of sexuality may involve the appropriation of feminine sexuality.

Butler's argument that drag is a transgressive strategy, as laid out in *Gender Trouble*, therefore fails to be discerning enough about the form drag should take and, more importantly, glosses over the fact that most drag takes place within a hierarchically gendered context. As such, I find myself in agreement with Bordo when she states that the male/female binary distinction, though a social construction, still has profound consequences for women's experiences, concluding in opposition to Butler that: 'In a culture that is in fact constructed by gender duality...one cannot simply be human' (1990, p.153). In subsequent works, Butler clarifies and qualifies her position; she admits that 'there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion' and that it can also be used in the service of 'reidealisation' (1993, p.125). She concludes, as do I, that '[a]t best...drag is a site of a certain ambivalence'.

Although drag as a strategy is not sufficient to transcend gender oppression, it is still a fascinating area of gender ambiguity and has consequences for future strategies in the way that it exposes assumptions and exclusions in feminist theory and demands contemporary feminists to be more flexible and inclusive. Drag illuminates the fault lines of patriarchal society by showing that there is nothing natural or essential about gender expressions; if there were, these disloyal expressions would not exist. However, by its reflective focus on certain presentations of gender, drag shows the continued importance of cultural hierarchies. Employing this new reading of the significance of drag to feminist discourse, one can re-interpret the drag ball participants in *Paris is Burning* as simultaneously both symbols of the instability of gender categories and victims of patriarchal culture. Their performances show that the rules can be broken, but the manner in which they are challenged proves their persistence. The significance of drag is in its ability to expose gender hierarchies as artificial and denatured, but it remains an uncomfortable strategy because it expresses persistent cultural myths about the representability of women. However, to

simply dismiss drag as regressive is to shoot the messenger and ignore the cultural hierarchies that make drag so problematic.

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