

Abstract

The paper has three major sections: 1.) The focus on ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ through philosophical discourse, I develop clarity around the terminology through queer theory to broaden categories around gender identity difficulties. 2.) Deconstructing is the method applied to this discourse of gender ‘performativity,’ I argue that it is one component of lesbian feminist theory, which examines Judith Butler, and Amelia Jones; queer theory further develops gender by strengthening the identity critique around gender. 3.) The concept of plurality is examined in the rhetoric around the term “polygender,” which liberates gender from binary, this essay questions the constraints of Butler and Jones’ stance on ‘performativity.’ I analyze the terms associated with gender through the deconstruction of “performance” and “performativity” in queer theory to bridge the homo-social environment of Europe with the Western paradigm.

Keywords: plurality, pluralism, polygender, gender, sex, sexuality, performativity, queer, transgender, non-binary/conforming

Beyond Performativity into the Gender Paradox

Gender is a laborious task to deconstruct, with confounding inquiries about one's self and identity. Gender and sexuality are limited by societal conceptions, which impose preemptive qualifications on power and confine this field to disputed descriptions of gender. However, what about transgender, non-binary/conforming individuals who separate their sexuality from their gender identity? I examine the concepts of 'performance' and 'performativity' in queer theory to bridge the homo-social context of Europe with the Western paradigm.

The fundamental theoretical concepts of this paper revolve around Judith Butler's theory of 'performativity' and gender identity. This paper will focus on four issues to deconstruct the analysis constraints and present new information about what I call polyphonic gender. First, by focusing on 'gender' and 'sexuality' through philosophical discourse, I will develop clarity around the terminology through queer theory to broaden categories around gender identity difficulties. Second, reconstructing the discourse of gender 'performativity,' I argue that it is one component of lesbian feminist theory. However, it develops further in queer theory, strengthening the identity critique around gender. Third, by turning this concept of plurality into rhetoric around the term "polygender" and moving away from the binary, this essay questions the constraints of Butler and Jones' stance on 'performativity,' suggesting another direction and a way of structuring the analysis. The four critical thinkers I will reference are Judith Butler, Amelia Jones, Jean-François Lyotard, and Lorenzo Bernini. Finally, I will analyze Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* to decipher the limitations of performativity and the rationale for how polygender suits the gender paradox.

Gender, on the other hand, is a new term that has only become relevant in Western society in the last forty years, since the 1980s. Susan Stryker explains in their book *Transgender*

History, “Gender is not the same as sex, though the two terms are often interchangeably, even in technical or scholarly literature” (Stryker 14). Gender derived from the Latin definition *genus* means ‘kind’ or ‘type,’ which becomes categorical and socially defined (Stryker 14) ! So now, it is crucial to question the term gender in contemporary reality and to move past only the signified body and performance. Transgender and non-binary people are left out through cultural configurations that currently reside in the ‘in-between,’ an illusive position in the paradox of gender reality. Through the implications of fantasy and the nature of representation in binarism, cultural perceptions fail these communities. Intellectuals have argued over the definition of ‘performativity’ for the past thirty years to comprehend where it has taken the topic of sex, gender, and sexuality. Performativity has been deconstructed and reconstructed through philosophical, psychoanalytic, ontological, and epistemological discourse, not limited to other formal discourse.

1. Performative

In the book *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler’s theory of gender being ‘performative’ is that gender is not of nature or natural but a social construct or an ‘act’ that an individual internalizes and so becomes true or reality for them. Butler states, “Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and ‘performative’ suggest a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 190). Butler’s definition of gender asserts that it is socially constructed and not determined by a person’s physical characteristics or what their genitalia signify. The term “act” refers to an action that a person intentionally presents through expression, such as wearing either masculine or feminine attire in contrast to their sex at birth. The categories of gender, sex, and sexuality as defined by society are a sort of political doctrine that perpetuates the discussion of biological determinism indefinitely. The corporeal

style is a silent protest against binary norms. For instance, assuming that a woman can relate through only physiological experiences is problematic. This assumption implies that the same societal influences all women, and culture also influences these experiences on what would define a woman to be. The performance of an 'act' to emphasize a particular body representation means every experience is homogeneous for the individual claiming to be a woman, which is not definitive on how to identify through the definition of a woman or 'What defines a woman?' The conceptual development is a reactionary basis built upon political and polarized gender expectations of language being finite. The fact that trans and non-binary/conforming people exist is a challenge to this dogma.

The terms gender and sex are not interchangeable because they are utilized in a singular way around 'identity.' Sex has multiple meanings like male and female, intercourse, genitals, and reproductive organs. Sex is derived from the Latin '*sexus*' which means 'a division.' The emphasis of this definition should point out the limitations through the exchange of gender and sex as interchangeable by unexamined cultural beliefs. Gender is an identity, and sexuality is the orientation of sexual attraction; while there can be overlap, there is a clear distinction between these categories. Butler's performativity theory has built a hegemonic framework around the immobilization of gender discourse. However, there is a paradoxical exclusion based on gender, which is inconclusive since performativity has become the focus of queer theory. Butler reexamined the term 'woman' due to their critique of heteronormative categories, which produced uncertainty for gender to identify lesbian women.

2. Lesbian Feminist Theory

Butler questions the category of 'women' and identifies relations around desire, sex, and gender through an attempt at genealogical limitations around political representation. Butler's

analysis of feminist theory and representation of 'women' is one category but does not include gender identity towards trans/non-binary/conforming individuals. Butler states clearly,

“If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because of pregendered ‘person’ transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (Butler 5).

To further dissect this, feminist theorists employ the term 'woman,' yet the word is still constructed within the binary, implying that sex and gender are social constructions. This furthers my argument of sex (male or female) being separate from gender by the mere fact that genitalia is a heteronormative assumption to classify what is male or female. To complicate things even further, when we stop using sex as a binary to mitigate politics and move toward a polyphonic reality to encompass multiple gender identities, it creates a paradox. To move forward from the oppressive social structure, there is a recognition that has to happen regarding the hegemonic disposition of this normative binary.

Butler describes the language around these terms as a continuous discourse to be unraveled that may never cease to be finite or completed. Butler states, “If gender itself is naturalized through grammatical norms, as Monique Wittig has argued, then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given” (Butler XX). Grammatical norms are written as a finite way to describe gender and presumed identity through male and female pronouns. However, these pronouns are expanded through transgender and non-binary/conforming persons. Butler also

alludes that sexuality is fluid and that gender and sex are not fixed. This is one interpretation.

Currently, a binary structure is taught from European to Western ideals for the polarity around pronouns assumed to take place in society based on he/him or she/her. Grammar is used to define pronouns that force an identity towards the subject as he or she. Still, they/them have been added to identify the other as non-identifiable. The pronouns ze/hir and ze/zir are other pronouns to describe the trans-community that does not want he/him, they/them, or she/her pronouns. The violence around gender through binary is based on heterosexual norms and has been naturalized through discourse around sexuality, not just biological sex determination. The matrix around usual gender roles is not contingent on biological sex, so it is essential to highlight this crucial difference between gender and sexuality. Performativity is simply one part of a gender that is acted, and gender is incredibly complicated with defining identities that unfold via several levels of expression.

What happens when we see a polyphony of these categories around gender in queer theory? So far, the results have been new terms like transgender, non-binary, and non-conforming, and a long list of queer identities has expanded. It is a constant development for newly defined terms evolving with social culture. The critique of feminist theory is a transition into a queer theory derived from third-wave feminism, as seen in Butler's analysis. There is a limitation to Butler because they do not address gender non-conforming and transgender people that sit in the uncomfortable liminal space of this binary structure of what is male or female. The term performativity is a product of living in the social structure, and having or performing, Jone explains, '...is a question of doing rather than being;' this is a shift in subjectivity and the vernacular around performance (Jones 35). If a person decides to 'become' or modify their gender expression independently of politics, they are not free of the social-cultural binary.

Butler's "performativity" would promote the "performing" of gender roles regardless of whether a transman or transwoman leans toward the binary or not. This results in the 'passibility' that agrees if a person is male or female presenting to be grounded by the binary construct. The passing of sex is performative, according to Butler's model of performativity. This thesis aims to examine gender identity and sexuality separately in current social theory in order to establish a discourse on the separation of these concepts, which is necessary for transgender people.

Amelia Jones states, in her book, *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance*, outlines these limitations around Butler's 'performative' theory by pointing out whiteness and privilege, a limitation, speaking in a cultural sense around genealogical thought on gender (Jones 264). Jones speaks about sex and gender relational and overlapping categorically. They are bound too closely, and it is time to reconsider their confusion and acknowledge this to make space for transgender and non-binary/conforming individuals, which is more akin to sex than gender. The fluidity within gender and sexuality continues to grow. Jones considers Butler's term 'performative' in relation to 'queer practice,' yet 'performing gender' has enveloped subjectivity until this day, and more may be said to deconstruct gender further. But how is this to be resolved?

3. Queer Theory and Polygender

The aspects of queer theory discussed in Lorenzo Bernini's book, *Queer Theories: An Introduction* examine power and sexuality. Bernini defines political philosophy as based on an ontology of actuality which is a part of 'becoming a being' that further investigates these questions (Bernini 43). Gender and queer identity has been opposed throughout Europe for the last forty years by the Vatican. Historically, the term queer was derogatory, with its original definition being strangely used as a slur in the 19th century (Bernini 100). Bernini argues queer

is a polysemantic term by looking at critical and political philosophy around plurality; this term is used as a ‘floating signifier’ (Bernini 26). According to Bernini, Queer theories encompass many methods and studies by deconstructing multiple areas that encompass these terms, which are contingent and temporal. If queer can be a polysemantic term, why can’t gender not be plural? However, let us examine the body and mind to further the argument about gender being transcendent.

Jean-Francois Lyotard’s book *In Human* has a chapter called *Can Thought Go on Without A Body?* The chapter looks at metanarratives to be argued against as the answer to bridging social and culture by universal theories. Lyotard explains paradoxical operations with the unconscious body and ontological differences, gender becomes transcendent (Lyotard 21). Lyotard was talking about the death of the sun and the ability to have a thought without a body to pursue the limitless discourse that goes beyond metanarratives that are fixed in society’s paradigms. How we perceive reality is not a fixed state. The existence of transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming people is a truth. The polyphonic rhetoric on gender through the body and the mind is transcendental which turns away from gender only being performative. An example to demonstrate this polygender is Virginia Woolfe’s novel *Orlando*.

The work of Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando*, written in 1928, lets the reader determine and contemplate the characteristics of gender pass performativity into polyphonic rhetoric. The novel has a narrative of sexuality and gender in one individual’s life; here, the author questions the nature of gender and sexuality in multiple timelines. Orlando passed through hundreds of years, never getting old but perhaps seconds or circumstances at most, aging from a young lad 16 to a 36-year-old woman. Woolf pierced through the fourth wall to the reader, “The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (Woolf 138). The

plurality of gender is instead 'becoming' rather than 'doing or performing one gender. Woolf argues that gender is a social construction and Orlando is the same person regardless of disposition.

An individual like Orlando can express a gender identity not determined by their sexuality, which is an example of radical expression. Woolf explained in the text, "it is enough for us to state the simple; Orlando was a man till the age thirty when he became a woman and has remained so ever since" (Woolf 139). At the end of the novel, Orlando is in 1928, living as a woman; she may reflect on the hundreds of years she spent as a male and a woman. The plurality is evident with gender identity through this analysis. Gender in society is a paradigm set to have a metanarrative to be fixed, yet the case for gender is not such if we accept there is not one way to define binary and gender.

4. Sex, Gender, Sexuality

Gender, sex, and sexuality are hegemonically produced by language, power, and the patriarchy, which results in further oppression by opposing the possibility of alternative genealogies. The analysis is not a scientific debate regarding what male or female is to biological chromosomes; this does nothing but keeps the argument at a plateau for gender identity and sexual identity from moving the discourse forward. The limitations for arguments result in a biological dispute; the sex is male and female is finite through empirical data for many thinkers throughout the years since Butler stated that performativity is a gender identity that separates from sex identity. As a reminder, Butler's critique was to liberate the lesbian feminist against heteronormative critique and move 'performativity' beyond the sex and gender roles of man and woman. This discourse moves beyond a scientific debate regarding what sex is; this leads to further evaluation is gender and sexuality; that is, transcendental subjectivity examines discourse

around nature.

The limitations have been pertinent throughout this essay, starting with introducing feminism into queer theory. Woolf describes Orlando becoming a woman, “His memory— but in future, we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for, ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’ --- her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle” (Woolf 138). The emphasis on plurality acknowledges that humans are living beings regardless of their genitalia. In addition to illustrating how a polygender person might transcend the phenomenon of plurality with identity, this Orlando explores the various realities of being both male and female through one individual.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, acknowledging the binary is the first step in deconstructing the complexity surrounding sexuality, sex, and gender so that it can be reevaluated beyond the binary. The focus on gender and sexuality develops clarity around terminology by deconstructing the prejudice around the vernacular. The discourse of gender ‘performativity’ has been stuck around Butler’s theory, but pluralism develops polygender by further strengthening the identity critique. The novel has given evidence of the discourse we have debated, from feminism questioning the nature of women to the concept of gender being polysemantic. The concept of plurality, through the rhetoric on “polygender” and trans-human philosophy, moves away from binary duality. On the contrary, this essay questioned the constraints of Butler and Jones’ stance on ‘performativity.’ Lyotard opens up the question of thought going on without a body as a limit to narratives already fixed in the paradigm. Transcendental subjectivity is a challenge to the poststructural philosopher since it demands an open perspective on gender concepts. I leave an inquiry: Is it the fear of the unknown that causes transgender and non-binary/conforming people to pose a social threat to

Western culture?

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