

## Introduction

*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* has been published in 1990. Butler explores the way we shape our identity through social interactions. While Simone de Beauvoir stated :‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ Butler’s thoughts on gender could be sum up by ‘:‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a gender’. Gender can be defined as the way we express our sexuality ; for instance the way a female intends to express her sexuality will define her gender, and this can be also applied to any human being. The emphasis Butler puts on the will, on the intention, is important as she is not only suggesting that our gender is built and not received at birth, but is also pointing out the plasticity of our gender. Since it is an extension of our intention, our gender or what we express as sexual subject, is never fixed and can change over time. This intent gives birth to a *performance*, seen by Butler as the moment where we decide to express our gender. Therefore life is a succession of *performances*. Digeser confirms that, according to Butler, there exists no natural necessity to see bodies as ordered into distinct sexes: “whatever sense of givenness or facticity we may possess about our bodies is a matter of historically sedimented practices and performances. Our pleasures, desires and pains do not emanate from a prediscursive body. Rather, it is a matter of historical contingency that we see the body as we do”<sup>1</sup>. It is actually related to Nietzsche’s idea that there is no doer behind the deed: with Butler it is gender or sexuality that does not exist before it is performed in a social context.

The question Butler asks is: “Does being a female constitute a “natural fact” or a cultural performance, or is “naturalness” constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?”. In other words, is our identity a given or a performance?

In order to present *Gender Trouble*, we need to explain what Butler consider as the source of the problem affecting the *deviants*, the *queer*: a society promoting masculine hegemony and based on

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<sup>1</sup> Digeser, Peter. “Performativity Trouble: Postmodern Feminism and Essential Subjects.” *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1994, pp. 655–673

phallogentrism (I). The solution, according to Butler, would be to loosen identity/categories to broaden *the margins* of our society (II).

## **I. A society that promotes masculine hegemony and based on phallogentrism**

### a. People participate to this promotion through their acts

First, Butler explains that the restricted boundaries of our body are due to masculine hegemony and that such a dominant culture prevents the motion, the displacing of boundaries. In other words a society based on phallogentrism curbs, limits the freedom of those who intend to remove heterosexual boundaries. Butler is here suggesting a new feminism, since the problem is not anymore the recurring inequalities that occur between men and women but the determination of who are men and who are women and the oversimplification of gender-identity implied in a masculine society.

A new feminism is proposed as the real problem seems to be a masculine hegemony that perspires through social interactions and prevents people to perform, to express freely their chosen gender. The oppression comes from the society as a whole based on the heterosexual norm, translated in daily acts and behaviors. Butler quotes Mary Douglas' *Purity and danger* who "suggests that the very contours of 'the body' are established through markings that seek to establish specific codes of cultural coherence. Any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies"<sup>2</sup> (p.2544).

The heterosexual society is thus responsible for oppressing, through taboos, the *deviants*. It is here a major difference with traditional feminism since it is not an order between men and women that is challenged but the whole order in the society, its foundation, understood as the binary distinction between male and female. According to April de Angelis, "Liberal essentialist feminism demanded an equal representation of women legally, socially, and politically, while deconstructionists critiqued this demand as entrenching the "construct" of woman in patriarchal society, arguing that

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent B. Leitch and al. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and criticism*, 2nd ed. Norton & Company. 2010

equality could never be “won” for women, since the very construction of woman was predicated on a male/female binary that would by its very nature construct woman in relation to man”<sup>3</sup>.

Worse, according to Butler, such heterosexual society is not only instituting taboos and controlled boundaries that block queer performance but is also designating the homosexual as a “*polluting person*” threatening the order of the society.

#### b. The *polluting person* and the disruption of boundaries

A society based on phallocentrism promotes a heterosexual behavior but also labels homosexuals as polluting persons according to Butler. We need to understand here that through the “polluting person” Butler is trying to show that the boundaries that limit the queer performance are physical before being mental/gender-based. According to Butler, homosexuals are seen as a source of pollution related to AIDS. Indeed it is first through physical oppression, exclusion, that boundaries are maintained.

Social boundaries then reflect these physical boundaries and lead to the ban of *performances*. It is prominent for Butler to start at a body level to explain where the biased society begins, to then be able to state that homosexuals are discriminated at a society level, by the heterosexual norm. Body and society are two concepts intertwined in Butler’s philosophy and the *gender trouble* starts at a body level to end up as a need to change the boundaries of the society.

Homosexuality is a gender that seems to be not allowed, *physically*, in a phallocentric society. Pointing out that the society as a whole has developed a heterosexual norm allows Butler to demand broader boundaries, at a body and society level alike. Butler writes: “In a sense, Simon Watney has identified the contemporary construction of “the polluting person” as the person with AIDS in his *Policing Desire: AIDS, Pornography and the Media*. Not only is the illness figured as the “gay disease”, but throughout the media’s hysterical and homophobic response to the illness there is a tactical construction of a continuity between the polluted status of the homosexual by virtue of the boundary-trespass that is homosexuality and the disease as a specific modality of homosexual pollution. That the disease is transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids suggests within the sensationalist graphics of homophobic signifying systems the dangers that permeable bodily boundaries present to the social order as such. Douglas remarks that ‘the body

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<sup>3</sup> De Angelis, April. “Troubling Gender on Stage and with the Critics.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2010, pp. 557–559.

is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious” (p.2545)<sup>4</sup>.

We can even trace, thanks to White, how Butler sees the pervasive problem of an heterosexual society developing a gender melancholy: “in the case of sexuality, the constitutive loss of the same sex as an object of desire manifests itself in the dominant heterosexual population as a ‘pervasive melancholy’. Butler would even suggest that ours is a “culture of gender melancholy”, exhibiting both aggression toward gays and lesbians and an incapacity to grieve the immense loss of life from AIDS.”<sup>5</sup> (p.175).

Furthermore, Nayak and Kehily confirm through their social study how this gender melancholy - synonym of at least an indifference regarding open boundaries needed by queer people - is actually shared in recent times by young students: “The video the teacher deployed included black and white actors and focused upon two male protagonists: one gay, the other straight. In an attempt to subvert stereotypical associations that conflate homosexuality with AIDS, the film goes on to reveal that it is the straight man that is HIV positive. However, the resistance of the young men lies in part with the powerful identifications they are making with masculine heterosexuality.”<sup>6</sup> (p.464.).

We have now seen how difficult it is for deviants to live and build their identity, their performance in a biased, heterosexual society. We have now to look up closer, deeper, at an organic level to understand where Butler starts her investigation.

### c. The inner and outer: a dialectic that excludes the deviants

The *inner* and *outer* should be understood as the boundaries of our physical body. Here lies the *trouble* contained in the expression “gender trouble” as Butler suggests that the correspondence between the external side and internal side of our body (our anus, as she suggests with the word ‘shit’) is no longer relevant.

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<sup>4</sup> Vincent B. Leitch and al. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and criticism*, 2nd ed. Norton & Company. 2010

<sup>5</sup> White, Stephen K. “As the World Turns: Ontology and Politics in Judith Butler.” *Polity*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1999, pp. 155–177.

<sup>6</sup> Nayak, Anoop, and Mary Jane Kehily. “Gender Undone: Subversion, Regulation and Embodiment in the Work of Judith Butler.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2006, pp. 459–472.

According to Butler, our external gender is not actually a reflection of our internal gender; it is not because I have the body of a female that I have to assume I am a female in exteriority, I can be a male as long as I perform such a behavior. I can reject, as shit, my internal gender, and perform what I consider my real gender, in my exteriority; and I can repeat this *performance* as many times as I want. I just need to reject, as shit, my current gender, to perform another one. “What constitutes through division the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. The boundary between the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit.”<sup>7</sup> (p.2546).

The dialectic of the *outer* and the *inner*, understood as a fight at an individual level that results in a specific performance, recalls the dialectic of the Master-Slave of Hegel. The main difference is that the slave effectively dies while the Master takes control as a performative gender, until a new performance is realized, putting on stage a new master, the previous one dying as a slave. This internal struggle that results in an effective external performance is asserted by Butler in *Giving an account* and explained by Ruti : “there is ‘no recentering of the subject without unleashing unacceptable sadism and cruelty’: To remain decentered, interestingly, means to remain implicated in the death of the other and so at a distance from the unbridled cruelty.. in which the self seeks to separate from its constitutive sociality and annihilate the other.” In other words, the self assertion with Butler must take place at the expense of the others.”<sup>8</sup> (p.106)

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<sup>7</sup> Vincent B. Leitch and al. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and criticism*, 2nd ed. Norton & Company. 2010

<sup>8</sup> Ruti, Mari. “The ethics of precarity: Judith Butler’s reluctant universalism.” *Remains of the Social: Desiring the Post-Apartheid*, edited by Maurits Van Bever Donker et al., Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2017, pp. 92–116.

## II. How to loosen identity/categories

### a. The anatomy of the performer, the gender of the performer and the gender of the performance

Butler offers a new understanding of the way we express our sexuality through the concepts of *performer* that can be defined as a mere individual, the *gender of the performer*, defined as the sexuality expressed by this individual, as a person and possibly different than its 'natural' sex. The *gender of the performance* is distinct from the gender of the performer though: it results that a man, whose gender is female, who identify himself as a female, could perform an activity as a male. An example could be a man, queer dancer, dressing and behaving like a female and behaving, the time of a performance, as a male. "If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance."<sup>9</sup> (p.2549). Such a so-called "dissonance" serves Butler's demonstration: we are not supposed to be what our body says we are, not either what we show.

This lays the foundation of the following idea: our gender/identity is a succession of performance that do not always correspond to our labelled gender, making gender a performative action in itself (gender identified vs gender expressed) and over time (gender previously expressed vs gender currently expressed).

### b. Understanding that identity/gender is performative..

Our identity is not any more viewed, considered as fixed in *Gender Trouble*. Our identity is a fluid, not a transparent one, but a colourful fluid managed by our will and that takes different forms: "This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities."<sup>10</sup> (p.2550). This diversity contained in our changing identity/gender opposes the idea of a given identity such as in an heterosexual society where the identity given at birth is supposed to be maintained over the time. Therefore, the splintering of the identity proposed by Butler questions the way we usually form

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<sup>9</sup> Vincent B. Leitch and al. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and criticism*, 2nd ed. Norton & Company. 2010

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

but also think about gender. The Other is supposed to acknowledge this fluidity even if he does not always share and live such process. The performativity of the gender is a paradox: it is an endless way to build an identity but also, in our opinion, an endless trouble suffered not only by the one who performs but also for the individuals who attend the performance.

c. ... and therefore cannot be assigned

The conclusion of this new feminism aiming to reverse a society supposedly based on phallogentrism and promoting masculine hegemony is that gender should be now understood as an ephemeral and elusive form of identity, a norm that is never catchable. As Butler writes: “gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized; “the internal” is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody. The ground of gender identity is a *stylized repetition of acts* through time.”<sup>11</sup> (p.2552).

### **Bibliography**

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<sup>11</sup> Vincent B. Leitch and al. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and criticism*, 2nd ed. Norton & Company. 2010

### **Bibliography's choice**

De Angelis' research paper is a good starting point to understand the difference (and the added value) of Butler's feminism compared to traditional feminism. Digeser confirms the radical suggestion Butler offer in *Gender Trouble*: our gender is not natural but made up over the time through interactions with our environment and is the result of our will. Therefore, both De Angelis and Digeser are important to get a first view of *Gender Trouble*. Nayak and Kehily and White are then helpful when it comes to dig in Butler's philosophy and figure out a specific situation where heterosexual norms are effective (the school). In the end, Ruti is prominent to acknowledge how the *deviant* builds his identity through the dialectic 'gender of the performer/gender of the performance'.