

JEZEBEL

EXPERPTS

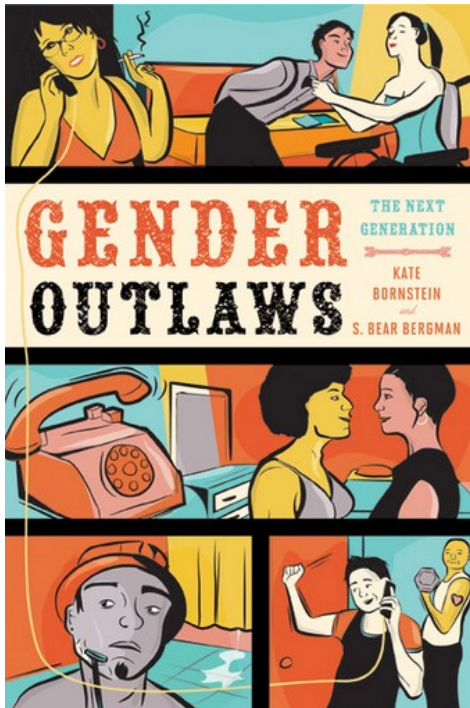
Gender Is Not Just A Performance

If one more person tells me that "all gender is performance," I think I am going to strangle them.

Perhaps most annoying about that soundbite is the somewhat snooty "I-took-a-gender-studies-class-and-you-didn't" sort of way in which it is most often recited, a magnificent irony given the way that phrase dumbs down gender. It is a crass oversimplification, as ridiculous as saying all gender is genitals, all gender is chromosomes, or all gender is socialization. In reality, gender is all of these things and more. In fact, if there's one thing that all of us should be able to agree on, it's that gender is a confusing and complicated mess. It's like a junior high school mixer, where our bodies and our internal desires awkwardly dance with one another, and with all the external expectations that other people place on us.

Sure, I can perform gender: I can curtsy, or throw like a girl, or bat my eyelashes. But performance doesn't explain why certain behaviors and ways of being come to me more naturally than others. It offers no insight into the countless restless nights I spent as a pre-teen wrestling with the inexplicable feeling that I should be female. It doesn't capture the very real physical and emotional changes that I experienced when I hormonally transitioned from testosterone to estrogen. Performance doesn't even begin to address the fact that, during my transition, I acted the same, wore the same T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers that I always had, yet once other people started reading me as female, they began treating me very differently. When we talk about my gender as though it were a performance, we let the audience — with all their expectations, prejudices, and presumptions — completely off the hook.

Look, I know that many contemporary



BY JULIA SERANO

SEP 24, 2010 2:19 PM

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queer folks and feminists embrace mantras like "all gender is performance," "all gender is drag," and "gender is just a construct." They seem empowered by the way these sayings give the impression that gender is merely a fiction. A facade. A figment of our imaginations, endlessly mutable and malleable. And of course, this is a convenient strategy, provided that you're not a trans woman who lacks the means to change her legal sex to female, and who thus runs the very real risk of being locked up in an all-male jail cell. Provided that you're not a trans man who has to navigate the discrepancy between his male identity and female history during job interviews and first dates. Whenever I hear someone who has not had a transsexual experience say that gender is just a construct or merely a performance, it always reminds me of that Stephen Colbert [gag](#) where he insists that he doesn't see race. It's easy to fictionalize an issue when you're not aware of the many ways in which you are privileged by it.

Almost every day of my life I deal with people who insist on seeing my femaleness as fake. People who make a point of calling me effeminate rather than feminine. People who slip up my pronouns, but only after they find out that I'm trans, never beforehand. People who insist on third-sexing me with labels like MTF, boy-girl, he-she, she-male, ze & hir — anything but simply female. Because I'm transsexual, I am sometimes accused of impersonation or deception when I am simply being myself. So it seems to me that this strategy of fictionalizing gender will only ever serve to marginalize me further.

So I ask you: Can't we find new ways of speaking? Shouldn't we be championing new slogans that empower all of us, whether trans or nontrans, queer or straight, female and/or male and/or none of the above?

Instead of trying to fictionalize gender, let's talk about the moments in life when gender feels all too real. Because gender doesn't feel like drag when you're a young trans child begging your parents not to cut your hair or not to force you to wear that dress. And gender doesn't feel like a performance when, for the first time in your life, you feel safe and empowered enough to express yourself in ways that resonate with you, rather than remaining closeted for the benefit of others. And gender doesn't feel like a construct when you finally find that special person whose body, personality, identity, and energy feels like a perfect fit with yours. Let's stop trying to deconstruct gender into nonexistence, and instead start celebrating it as inexplicable, varied, profound, and intricate.

So don't you dare dismiss my gender as construct, drag, or performance. My gender is a work of non-fiction.

The above is an excerpt from "Performance Piece" by [Julia Serano](#), from the book [Gender Outlaws](#) edited by Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman. Excerpted by arrangement with Seal Press, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Copyright (c) 2010.

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**Tim Chevalier**

17 May 2011 8:04 PM ↻

Not sure why so many commenters are mentioning Judith Butler's name when Serano -- intentionally, I presume -- *didn't*?

**tekdaemon**

26 Sep 2010 1:08 AM ↻

"It is a crass oversimplification, as ridiculous as saying all gender is genitals, all gender is chromosomes, or all gender is socialization. In reality, gender is all of these things and more." It sounds like you're mixing up sex with gender, because gender is a subjective psychological experience and not a physical characteristic of DNA. There are women who have XY chromosomes but that doesn't change their gender, it just defines their genetic sex though not physical sex. One's physical sex and genetics can have an impact on one's gender and that's definitely true but gender is not "all of these things" just because gender isn't a physical thing at all.

**Riley Anne**

25 Sep 2010 3:37 AM ↻

I'd like to take this moment to say that I love Kate Bornstein.

**Gigi**

25 Sep 2010 2:30 AM ↻

Thanks for this Jezebel!

If you liked this, read Julia's book "Whipping Girl." It's great.

**Artemis47**

25 Sep 2010 12:54 AM ↻

I took a great "biology of gender" class in college that addressed this issue. On the first day of class, the professor asked for a show of hands: who thought gender was all performance and socialization? Most people raised their hands. At the end of the semester, which included a great deal of coverage of trans issues, she asked the question again. The class consensus had totally shifted: now, everyone agreed that gender was innate and generally immutable (although far from binary). Socialization simply provided the filter through which people learned to express their gender identity (e.g. spike heels vs. neck rings vs. dirndls).

promoted by morninggloria

**Euryale**

25 Sep 2010 12:06 AM ↻

To say that gender is performed isn't to say that it is fake at all.

Performance is how we show people around us who we are. We all perform all of our identities every day. One might perform college-student-ness by wearing a T-shirt with their school's logo on it. One might perform membership in a circle of friends by referencing an in-joke. One might perform a religious identity by saying "no thanks" to a slice of pepperoni pizza. None of these performances would be "fictional". They would just be these people being who they are in ways that lets other people know who they are.

The author talks about (presumably "feminine") behaviors that came naturally to her when she was a young boy. She identifies as female and therefore assumes that these natural behaviors have something inherently feminine about them. I would argue that the identity comes before the behavior. If you see girls doing Z and you identify with them, of course Z is the natural way for you to behave. That doesn't make the behavior fake or forced at all. After all, that's how those XX girls were socialized into that behavior too.

Performance can be a fraught metaphor for behavior taken, as it is, from the language of the stage. Theater is full of artifice, but that doesn't mean that all of that artifice is attached to performance in life the way it is on stage. One should be wary of taking metaphors too literally.



dettajay @Euryale



@Euryale: I think you hit the nail on the head - thanks for articulating what felt uncomfortable with re: this piece.

Hide 1 reply



Grandpapular

24 Sep 2010 10:32 PM

I guess there is an implicit critique of Butler in the assumption that all "women" (i feel like such an asshole whenever i use quotes like that) have the very same body-driven reactions as the author. This is clearly not true.



geekgirlliz

24 Sep 2010 9:47 PM

It helps to take to heart the fact that 'performance' has totally different connotations in a social studies environment. In Anthropology, we say we perform culture. We do not mean that we act it out as if on a stage. We mean perform in the sense that it is a human action. As in, my dentist performed an extraction on my bad tooth.

Webster puts it as:

" a : to do in a formal manner or according to prescribed ritual [that's culture]

: to carry out an action or pattern of behavior : act, function [that's performance]

: to give a performance : play "

The latter is precisely what we DON'T mean.

I see the point of the author, and I hear her complaints. It's not easy being even a little genderqueer, as I well know. However, as a social scientist, we are not "fictionalizing gender", we are simply using a different definition of the word than people seem to expect. The more common one, in fact.

promoted by daradoodle



oaktree89 @geekgirlliz



@geekgirlliz: I completely agree with your assessment of the word "performance" as it's used in an academic context- I'm studying anthropology, and I've read my fair share about the performance of culture, etc.

However, I think that the author of this piece makes a good point: it has become sort of trendy to dismiss any ideas of gender as being something innate, and for many people that just doesn't ring true. I don't think the academic community as a whole is necessarily fictionalizing gender (although some probably are), but I do think that a lot of laypersons, if you will, are doing just that, and it's incredibly detrimental to the struggles of trans, cis, and genderqueer people alike.



geekgirlliz @oaktree89



@oaktree89: I totally see the point about others perceiving 'performance' as if it were 'play

performance'. That does make a lot of sense that people would take it out of context.

Hide 2 replies



oldscrumby

24 Sep 2010 8:43 PM ↻

I don't think the author is critiquing Butler so much as the socialism-light folk who lift the basic premise out of it's academic setting and apply it as gospel to the real world. The gross oversimplification just feeds the massive catch-22 of transgenderism. Strict gender roles provide more validity to transsexuals but loose gender roles give them more room to actually change. This piece addresses that loss of validity and it's a rightful complaint. It should be "if gender doesn't matter then I will accept and respect anyone's choice " but it often actually is "gender doesn't matter so your choices about it don't matter and I'm not going to respect them"

promoted by Norton



Grandpapular @oldscrumby



@oldscrumby: Right, Butler follows Irigaray, who's thesis is gender is real.

Hide 1 reply



lil gaywad

24 Sep 2010 8:19 PM ↻

Stoked to see Julia Serano on Jezebel, she's been very inspiring. I think the critics of this post really need to check out her book Whipping Girl, because it has described trans stuff way better than anything I've ever read. For a start, being transsexual is not about gender, it's about SEX. In her book, Serano puts forward a theory that we all have an innate brain sex. She comes from a human biology background and really knows her shit. The thing that bothers me with the performative gender thing, is that if all it takes to be "female" is social construction, wouldn't I, as a trans man, just be female because I was brought up to think I was? How about that poor kid who got his circumcision butchered, was castrated and brought up as a girl? He never felt female, discovered he wasn't at adolescence and had such hard time he eventually killed himself. That whole experiment was meant to prove how gender is nothing but a social construct, which I think is false.

I think gendered activities are definitely a construct. However I don't think you can completely discount things like biology and hormones, cos duh, they contribute.

And I am not a stereotypical manly man. I am not trying to "perform" being a man. I just do my shit, and I'm a dude, the end.

promoted by curioushair



daradoodle @lil gaywad



@lil gaywad: The idea of gender performativity doesn't discount biological sex. Anyone who claims that simply hasn't read the texts that outline the idea, or is misinterpreting them.

Hide 1 reply



CrackedEg

24 Sep 2010 7:53 PM ↻

When people say gender is a performance, they don't mean that in the strictest sense of performing some artifice for an audience. They mean that gender is something learned and practiced, and it is very much a performative *interaction*; your gender is shaped by how you interact with others. That doesn't mean that gender isn't *real*. That's not the same as dismissing it! Certainly it would be insulting to call a trans person's gender a 'drag performance' but that's a totally different thing. Also different from gender? Sex, which you confuse with gender at several points in here.

You don't have to have taken a women's studies course to talk about gender, but you should at least know the fundamentals of what you are critiquing.



Morbidda Destiny

24 Sep 2010 7:18 PM ↻

Also, last I checked, "performance" in a gender studies context does not mean stuff like "bats one's eyelashes" or "knows how to throw a football in that cool way where it arcs and spins in the air". I hate that coy flirty shit, and yet last time I checked I was still female. Most of my male friends know fuck all about sports (either observing or playing), and I assume most of them agree with me that they are male. It's all way, way more complicated than that.

promoted by Ms Meghan is Reppin' the Triforce



Ms Meghan is Reppin' the Triforce @Morbidda Destiny



@Morbidda Destiny: Right, it's not the only performance of gender but it is a small performance of gender.

Hide 1 reply



Morbidda Destiny

24 Sep 2010 7:15 PM ↻

Is the problem with words like "performance" and "construct", or is the problem with "just" and "merely"?

Because, sure, gender is big and weird and complicated and not "merely" anything.

However, if gender were not a construct or a thing that we perform, trans people could not exist. The idea that you want to define gender in your own way, or you want to become a gender that does not match the body you were born with, even the idea that one can conform or not to a gendered system, all depend on the notion of gender as construct/performance.



OutOfTheAsh @Morbidda Destiny



You are entirely correct. I suspect even that the diminishing words that Julia represents as quotes from others are her own gloss (e.g. Someone says "gender is a construct" and the listener who interprets this as dismissive reflexively hears the "just"--ascribing it to the speaker subsequently).

Seems she's "just" mired in the popular conception that natural=good, and all else isn't. Hence her view is a construct of the age in which she lives. Which is, errrm, natural, but not good--as she's mistaking a language donnybrook for a philosophical debate.

All these building/making words are slipping further into negative connotation, that were once wonderful: Artificial, manufactured--even plastic and synthetic. We're all Rousseau now, but it's very recent. Even my own grandparents (mid-20th century people, barely a generation out of peasantry) would have view these terms much more positively than I.

I quite definitely "performed" my transition--shit didn't just happen, yo! However you may be over-stepping to say trans people couldn't *exists* without construction/performance. Better perhaps to say they'd not be evident, as the media of it's expression wouldn't exist.

Hide 1 reply



cletör

24 Sep 2010 7:05 PM ↻

Well, gender IS a construct...but that doesn't make it not real. We construct social meaning around biological phenomena. Gender is a social construct surrounding biological sex. But "construct" doesn't mean fake. The Empire State Building is a cultural construct, too, but just because it's a construct doesn't mean you should jump off of it.

promoted by lurkerbynature



DestructoGirl @cletör



@cletar: Yep, pretty much. It is a construct, but that construct clearly exists and is recognized within our society.



cletör @DestructoGirl



@DestructoGirl: That's basically what a society is--a group of people that recognize the same constructs.

promoted by Norton

Hide 2 replies



informalist

24 Sep 2010 6:57 PM



This is a terrific essay. I get tired of hearing people - from random folks on the internet to scholars who should probably know better - toss aside the biology as though it were entirely separable from the socialization. That is just not the way *anything* in a human being works - from gender to intelligence to personality traits. There is no neat line between what your brain structure and the hormones coursing through you implies versus what you have learned through your culture. The social sciences can't reject biology if they truly want to find explanations for human behavior - and vice versa.

promoted by Ms Meghan is Reppin' the Triforce



Ms Meghan is Reppin' the Triforce @informalist



@informalist: Well here is the issue with biology in regards to gender: what about the physiological boy who doesn't want to be one or doesn't feel like he is one? To some degree separating sex from gender is important and necessary, because gender is *not* just biological characteristics.

Hide 1 reply



oddbrawl

24 Sep 2010 6:27 PM



I am glad so many commenters have come to Butler's defense, and I hope it means there are lots of vocal people out there who DO have a good, clear understanding of the performativity of identity constructs. Hopefully we can make some headway against the addled soundbite-spewers that the author has the misfortune to encounter so often.

This piece also, however, brings to mind one thing that I think may be at the heart of the uneasiness between feminist and trans communities: the question of gendered behavior as innate.

It is really difficult for me to admit any "natural" basis to gendered behaviors, because that notion has caused me a lot of personal grief, and because it is constantly evoked to legitimize the disadvantage of women. Even though on the surface a trans identity would seem to disrupt the idea of gender as innate, in other ways, it reinforces it. Yes, it contradicts the correlation between the genitalia a person is born with and the gender identity that fits that person, but in doing so would seem to demonstrate that there is such a thing as "male" and "female" in the first place, even if it can't be defined the way we were taught it was. Even from an "it's all a spectrum" perspective, the experiences of some people suggest that there is still a dividing line in the middle, and that that line is important.

I am cis and (pass-for-straight-more-than-I'd-like-to) femme and as such am in no position to tell a trans person that his or her experience is not legitimate. I take testimonies of experience such as the one above as plain, simple truth. But the idea of a biological basis for gender-associated behaviors is a bitter, bitter, terrifying pill for me to swallow---and I am still in the process of negotiating a version of feminism that reconciles this.

promoted by Norton



voteforme @odd brawl



@odd brawl: I feel the same way about the feminism-vs-trans issue and have come under fire for it a few times on this site. We have to accept that different groups are going to fight for different things and aren't always going to be on the same side. Because yes, trans activism does state/imply that the gender binary is based in biology.



queen honeybee @odd brawl



@odd brawl: This is exactly what I've been going through as I've been trying to be what I think is a better feminist (so to speak) as a trans ally.

You said it so well. And I hope someone answers...at least for me...two of the points you made:

- "It is really difficult for me to admit any "natural" basis to gendered behaviors, because that notion has caused me a lot of personal grief, and because it is constantly evoked to legitimize the disadvantage of women."

- "But the idea of a biological basis for gender-associated behaviors is a bitter, bitter, terrifying pill for me to swallow---and I am still in the process of negotiating a version of feminism that reconciles this."

I believe above all that every human should be treated with dignity and respect, and I've learned a lot about adjusting my attitudes and language to support trans-people in that respect. (e.g. using whatever gender pronoun they identify with - not he/she, etc.)

But I still feel a bit confused and threatened about what this all means for women's rights and gender equality.

Anyone have some insight on how to address these issues? Thanks!



Boudicca @odd brawl



@odd brawl: This is how I feel, too. I am a hetero-identified cis-woman.

Hide 3 replies



nobodyr aka bradmillershero

24 Sep 2010 6:22 PM



No, actually gender *is* just a performance.

Saying anything else- "boys will be boys, girls will be girls"- is just sexism.



Kelsey Tucker

24 Sep 2010 5:59 PM



if gender is a performance, and if a la judith butler, drag queens most ultimately subvert it, where is the room for the actual lived experiences of trans people?

Ms Meghan is Reppin' the Triforce approved this comment

**Ms Meghan is Reppin' the Triforce** @Kelsey Tucker

@Kelsey Tucker: Well, why is subversion such a bad thing? By subverting the dominant gender dichotomy aren't you challenging it's rigidity?

**lil gaywad** @Kelsey Tucker

@Kelsey Tucker: what about trans man drag queens! they do exist!

Hide 2 replies**Lynx**

24 Sep 2010 5:54 PM

I love julia serano!!!

**tokyogirl**

24 Sep 2010 5:41 PM

I think what most commenters are getting knee-jerky about is unintentionally hypocritical. Perhaps the writer didn't articulate well enough to certain readers, but it seems to me, the argument is about those who would misinterpret Butler; those who would go on to misuse it and show their own hypocrisy by not truly absorbing the message at all, instead of using it as a hipster ethical "soundbite". People who would use that quotation incorrectly, from a privileged perspective, to passive-aggressively dismiss the real, crappy treatment of transgendered people.

-That-, to me, is what it sounds like this writer is railing against, rather than the original text and its true intentions.

And since the writer's argument is against those trying to belittle the experiences of others, rather than Butler's work itself, there needn't be any actual requirement to know the original text to the extent that others, here do (and good for them), so criticisms from that angle may have missed the mark.

promoted by lurkerbynature

**lurkerbynature** @tokyogirl

@tokyogirl: Problem is, she identifies no difference between the addled soundbites and a nuanced theory that actually supports and expresses what she describes in her own lived experience. Which in a backhanded way, gives undeserved legitimacy to the misinterpretations and makes it easier to dismiss unread someone who could be helpful in understanding the system that reinforces crappy treatment of those who don't fit normative ideals.

**tokyogirl** @lurkerbynature

@lurkerbynature: I'm aware of what others feel the 'problem' to be. Like I said - perhaps the writer did not clarify well enough for others, but it didn't take much reading between the lines for me to get at what I think the actual intention of this piece was. Whilst such criticism may be legitimate to an extent, I feel the backlash in the comments (and in some cases, the nastiness) outweigh the effort to read into it, and as such, work against what they (other commenters) are trying to say.

Hide 2 replies**firefly82**

24 Sep 2010 5:38 PM

I was about to comment "can I just hit a 'like' button on this whole damn post?" And then I realized that I probably could...ah, my brain is only starting to catch up to the facebook age.

**TheWorstMugger**

24 Sep 2010 5:30 PM ↻

At least in my experience very few people, if any, have said "all" gender is a performance.

For a lot of people it's incredibly constructive to see aspects of gender as a performance. It helps deconstruct way we see certain behaviors, ways of dressing/speaking/moving, etc as gendered. It makes gender more of a plaything than a constricting and oppressive social norm. Where you may find the "gender as performative" narrative inapplicable to you, others may find that it frees them from being confined to a "biological" or "natural" gender, or societal gendered expectations.

The "all" changes the meaning quite a bit of course. The "all" essentializes in the same way that it does when we're told that "all" gender is biological.

I also don't necessarily interpret "gender as performative" equating gender being "fake" or "fiction." There's nothing fake about the way people choose to perform their gender. That performance can define whole identities, sexualities, desires.

I understand becoming frustrated by people who deny your personal experiences and who push an understanding of gender on you that you don't live, however to deny people who do benefit from the "gender as performance" understanding universally is to do the same. I think if anything it's a testament to the multitude of different ways to live as gendered beings that makes the simplistic or binary understandings of gender seem so absurd.

(disclaimer: I love Butler, but I'm not really coming from the Butler camp on this one. More performance studies and personal experience)

**TXcharm318**

24 Sep 2010 5:17 PM ↻

The gender as performance thing is borrowed from Judith Butler. Butler argues that gender is PERFORMATIVE, which is not the same as performance. Now, I am still deciphering what that means as I am currently working through Butler, but Butler has a lot to offer in the area of gender studies. I would recommend reading her rather than taking soundbites from gender studies students who have not sat down and tried to grapple with Butler's reading themselves. You recognize that it's a soundbite, yet you don't seek to understand what more the phrase may mean?

**oddbrawl** @TXcharm318

@TXcharm318: I think the point may be that the author's beef IS with those very same "gender studies students who have not sat down and tried to grapple with Butler's reading themselves." She probably runs into them a lot more frequently than she runs into Judith Butler, herself.

**TXcharm318** @oddbrawl

@oddbrawl: Perhaps that is her true beef, but in the article she mentions not only the students, but also directly attacks the concept of gender as performance itself.

Hide 2 replies**rebelwerewolf**

24 Sep 2010 4:42 PM ↻

Just for clarification: Saying something is a social construct does not mean that it does not exist or that there are not very real consequences. It's saying that it's a mindset created and

perpetuated by a society. As such, as long as you live in the society, you are affected by social constructs.

Gender aside, if I'm not wearing basketball shorts, picking my nose, and scratching my ass, I'm performing.



StarHen

24 Sep 2010 4:35 PM ↻

"My gender is a work of non-fiction."

Powerful.

Many have commented that this article misconstrues performance theory; I am not well-versed enough in that area to directly address that, but it seems to me this article provides an indictment against (relatively) popular conceptions of what this idea of "performance" means and how it influences/reflects the way some people conceive of gender--and use that concept to invalidate personal experience and identity. And in that respect, I think this is an important discussion to have. Serano herself acknowledges that such dismissals are oversimplified "soundbites".

Anyway, I'm glad to see this piece here. Gender, being a puzzle and a multi-strand thing with personal, internal dimensions as well as external aspects, which is both self-generated and responsive, can always stand to be complicated.



bananas!

24 Sep 2010 4:23 PM ↻

I think this piece is really awesome and thanks for reposting.

A couple of folks have mentioned that the author might not understand some concepts in gender studies and should do some homework.

I don't read this as an academic piece. I read this as someone talking about their lived experience and what language makes them empowered vs. not empowered.

As someone who has spent a lot of time in queer/ activist communities I can really identify with this sentiment. There's a lot of policing of other folks and a lot of people making statements as if they apply to everyone.

I am femme and I actually had an androgynous friend tell me that they did not like my gender presentation. Um..what? THIS IS WHO I AM.

promoted by la.donna.pietra



StarHen @bananas!



@bananas!: "I don't read this as an academic piece. I read this as someone talking about their lived experience and what language makes them empowered vs. not empowered. "

Yeah! And these ideas/pieces of language/ways of speaking about gender that have greater currency may not represent a "perfect" reading of academic theory, but they are out in the world, shaping people's discussions and thoughts and serving to alienate and invalidate some experiences and identities, even if they may seem helpful to many (especially those who have (largely, cis) privilege).



Mireille is German for The Bart, The @bananas!



@bananas!: I find it ironic that people would suggest Julia Serano should bone up on gender

studies. Try reading her book "Whipping Girl".



Not-Shattered @bananas!



@bananas!: I really dislike the tone of "she needs to do her homework" when as a marginalized person, the author has her lived experience.

Not everyone was a liberal arts major in college. That's okay. I would think that this piece could be used to further discussion.



daradoodle @bananas!



@bananas!: "I don't read this as an academic piece. I read this as someone talking about their lived experience and what language makes them empowered vs. not empowered. "

I'm not sure how someone dealing with issues of gender can separate these things. Political and scholarly works about gender are necessarily personal. Anything would be pretty much useless. But that doesn't mean that its ok to throw around references to other people's work in a way that willfully misinterprets them.

If there had been a distinction made in the article between the people who use these ideas simplistically, and the complex texts they were written in, I would have a lot more positive things to say about it. It's definitely calling out a problematic phenomenon, and a really nasty part of the culture of the left in the US. But it's important to separate a critique of these behavioral patterns from a dismissal of entire concept.s

Hide 4 replies



knightgee

24 Sep 2010 4:23 PM

I feel like so many misunderstood that bit of Butler. She was not referring to a conscious act, but one born out of structures forced on you from birth. We all perform gender unconsciously and accept it as natural because we've never been shown anything different. It is not literal performance in the way an actor chooses a role and then puts on the guise of that character for a few hours on set every day. This is not a way of saying that gender is not an actual real force with genuine benefits and consequences (something that Judith Butler acknowledges when discussing the myriad forms of oppression and violence suffered by women), it is to say that the idea that gender is natural, rigid, and unchanging is completely false. Gender being constructed doesn't mean it isn't real.

promoted by Marla Singer



Mireille is German for The Bart, The @knightgee



@knightgee: In that case, I don't think it's Serano that has the issue, as she appears to be speaking to the many people that misunderstood Butler, then.



DestructoGirl @knightgee



@knightgee: Very well-put.



ChasteMaidinCheapsid... @knightgee



@knightgee: This is the post everyone needs to see.

Hide 3 replies



iowadem

24 Sep 2010 4:22 PM

I would love to know the perspective of someone who has transitioned from male to female about what the changes were. I am very curious what they consider to be female traits related to the change in hormones. I firmly believe that as a woman I am much more prone to crying and being overtaken by emotion and I hate it! Is my perception that this is gender-related true? Is there any way to know?

promoted by greeneyedfem (MzJ+SG deserve stars)



greeneyedfem @iowadem



@newlymrs: Many trans men and women have written about the effects taking hormones have had on their emotional states -- Julia Serano, the author of this piece, has a bit about hormones in her book *Whipping Girl*. Another good book by a trans woman about her transition is *She's Not There* by Jenny Boylan. You could also look at the many individual and group blogs written by trans folks to see what they say.

From what I've heard and read, taking hormones can affect your emotional state -- but how and to what degree depend on the individual person. Some trans men report feeling an uptick in feelings of anger when first taking T -- whereas my partner actually felt calmer. It did, however, affect his sex drive (went WAY up) and seems to have affected his ability to cry as easily. Of course, transitioning as a whole also affects your emotional state -- and again, everyone is different.

That's what's important for me to remember -- we all have different hormone levels running around in us -- from other men, other women, and at different times in our lives. Some men cry more easily than others -- as do some women. We're all individuals, and the "men are from mars, women are from venus" bullshit just serves to box us in and erase the diversity of gender expressions.



Not-Shattered @greeneyedfem



@greeneyedfem (MzJ+SG deserve stars): True. How many women can take the same birth control and have different side effects?

promoted by greeneyedfem (MzJ+SG deserve stars)



Ismone @iowadem



@newlymrs: Hormones do effect the ability to cry. I learned this by being pregnant, and because my levels have changed over the years. The more female hormones I have in my system, the easier it is for me to cry for no reason.

Sometimes men in their mid-forties to mid-fifties find themselves crying a lot more (i.e., at commercials) and this is also due to hormonal changes.

promoted by greeneyedfem (MzJ+SG deserve stars)



lil gaywad @iowadem



@newlymrs: Yeah, I'm a trans guy and pre-T, but I've heard a lot of guys on T say it is way harder to cry. Currently I can cry quite easily. I cried at the end of Twins last night. It was so moving.



hildurness @iowadem



@newlymrs: After I started hormones crying became a lot easier. My emotions changed all over but it's hard for me to remember much from before taking them because the main thing is that I am confident and comfortable in my own skin, which isn't entirely the hormones in and of themselves. Sexual attraction changes a lot too and there is a physical reaction in my

body that isn't genital centric like it was before hormones.



roseofmay @iowadem



@newlymrs: "I firmly believe that as a woman I am much more prone to crying and being overtaken by emotion and I hate it!"

After about 2-3 months on hormones, I felt the same way. I really like it though. Before, I felt like I couldn't express myself how I wanted too, like my ability to show emotions was dulled and never came though how I wanted to. Now they do and I feel much more comfortable knowing my feelings are expressed the way I want them to be.

Not sure if that answers your question though.

Hide 6 replies



maurasaurus

24 Sep 2010 4:15 PM



I'm having flashbacks to my horrible Philosophy of Gender class where we were told to line up in order of most masculine to most feminine, and I wound up at the end of the feminine line because I didn't feel like I'd ever "performed masculinity." Some of the other students tried to talk me out of it. The question, "You mean you've never questioned your gender identity?" was asked as if I'd declared I was wearing a chastity belt and corset under my dress. I think there's definitely a strain of gender studies--not all or even most of the discipline, but a really obnoxious, vocal minority--that encourages people to believe there's a right way to have a gender, and that anyone who doesn't have the exact same experiences or philosophy is oppressed or delusional.



lil gaywad @maurasaurus



@maurasaurus: That seems really fucking unethical! ugh!

Hide 1 reply



Ginger Gal

24 Sep 2010 4:15 PM



Gender is a *learned* performance; it's not consciously done, but it is a performance based on society's expectations.



lwixted

24 Sep 2010 3:58 PM



While I do believe that gender is a construct/performance - that doesn't mean that it isn't experienced & felt in material ways

funnyface approved this comment
promoted by daradoodle



Ri_L is Team Squidward

24 Sep 2010 3:48 PM



I hate the concept of "gender is performance". I feel like it invalidates people's experiences of gender, dismisses it as illusion, like it says "well, you aren't really that way", or "you're only that way because you've been conditioned to be", or "you should really be this way instead". A large part of gender is societal, but, from a little girl realizing she genuinely enjoys dresses and dolls and pink to a little boy realizing he's a she, a person's internal experience of gender is absolutely real and valid. Underneath it all you are who you are.



eri401

24 Sep 2010 3:45 PM



Sounds like someone did not read their Judith Butler very carefully.

**oudemia** @eri401**@eri401:** Or at all.**CapitolaTheMadcap** @eri401**@eri401:** Yes, exactly. Butler is amazing when it comes to issues of gender and trans-identity.**cassiebearRAWR** @CapitolaTheMadcap

@CapitolaTheMadcap: Amazing? I didn't really get that out of her stuff. I forgot which book it was (probably *Gender Trouble*), but she said something to the effect of "transsexual and transgender people exist, therefore what I say about gender performativity is true". Which, you know, is sort of a privileged, shitty thing to do.

promoted by boxspelunker

**CapitolaTheMadcap** @cassiebearRAWR

The idea that sexual practice has the power to destabilize gender emerged from my reading of Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" and sought to establish that normative sexuality fortifies normative gender. Briefly, one is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender. I take it that this is the first formulation of "gender trouble" in this text. I sought to understand some of the terror and anxiety that some people suffer in "becoming gay," the fear of losing one's place in gender or of not knowing who one will be if one sleeps with someone of the ostensibly "same" gender. This constitutes a certain crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language. This issue has become more acute as we consider various new forms of gendering that have emerged in light of transgenderism and transsexuality, lesbian and gay parenting, new butch and femme identities. When and why, for instance, do some butch lesbians who become parents become "dads" and others become "moms"?

What about the notion, suggested by Kate Bornstein, that a **trans**-sexual cannot be described by the noun of "woman" or "man," but must be approached through active verbs that attest to the constant transformation which "is" the new identity or, indeed, the "in-betweenness" that puts the being of gendered identity into question? Although some lesbians argue that butches have nothing to do with "being a man," others insist that their butchness is or was only a route to a desired status

xi

@cassiebearRAWR: I don't have a copy in front of me at the moment, but I don't remember getting that vibe from her at all.

As far as Google Books can tell me, *Gender Trouble* sees the issues society has with transsexual and transgendered identities as one of many signs of the gender trouble. I've included a screen shot of the intro where she first mentions the topic. She does admit that, if she were to revise the book, she would include more analysis of trans-identity.

**oudemia** @CapitolaTheMadcap

@CapitolaTheMadcap: Everyone in the world ever should read Rubin's "The Traffic in Women."

**CapitolaTheMadcap** @oudemia**@oudemia:** I'll look it up. Thanks for the tip!**greeneyedmonster** @eri401**@eri401:** I was thinking the same thing.**lil gaywad** @eri401

@eri401: Perhaps you could try reading Julia Serano's book "Whipping Girl" very carefully. She is a biologist and a trans woman and knows a hell of a lot about gender and sex theory.

**Ms Meghan is Reppin' the Triforce** @eri401**@eri401:** I'm a pretty big fan of Butler, but I see no reason for pretension here. I'm actually

really excited about this post, it's generating a lot of interesting discussion (and inspiring me to hit the books!) but there's no need to seemingly invalidate someone's life experience because it does not agree with the work of a prominent scholar.



Grandpapular @cassiebearRAWR



@cassiebearRAWR: Why? Members of the trans community generally seem to feel liberated by her work because she's unmoored gender roles from body parts. I don't follow, i guess.



cassiebearRAWR @Grandpapular



@Grandpapular: Well given that Julia Serano is a prominent trans women taking issue with the idea, perhaps not.

See, the thing is, while there are some trans people who are all "rah rah radicalism down with the patriarchy" and really into queer theory and shit like that, there are also a lot of binary identified transsexual people who essentially want nothing more than to transition, and blend in with heteronormative society. Basically like the vast majority of cis people who don't really get involved with queer theory or feminism on a very deep level. So to take these trans people - who just want to be "normal" and get on with their lives - and say "LOOK THEY ARE SO DIFFERENT SO THEREFORE MY THEORY IS CORRECT", it's a really shitty thing to do.



Grandpapular @cassiebearRAWR



@cassiebearRAWR: Except that she's not saying "Look they are so different," she's saying "look, your perception of difference is bullshit because trans folk demonstrate de-stabilized gender just like we do." She's not singling out the trans community, they just kind of incidentally become a key part of her argument (and it's actually the hermaphroditic community, not the trans community).

*Edited for dumbness



cassiebearRAWR @Grandpapular



@Grandpapular: Yeah, but it still doesn't make it okay.

Hide 13 replies



keo

24 Sep 2010 3:42 PM



I think the rhetoric against the idea of gender as "performance" take away from this article. The last half was pretty interesting, and I hadn't thought of it before, but there are some false dichotomies up in here.



SeeKateRun

24 Sep 2010 3:42 PM



Maybe we need to look harder at the criteria we use to establish an individual's sex then. I come at this from a biological anthropology viewpoint in that gender and sex are two separate things and sometimes they are the "same" and sometimes not. Maybe sex is more than just your chromosomal makeup. I mean there are people all over that spectrum: XXX, XXY, just one X, etc, so maybe hormonal/chemical fluctuations in utero influence sex more than we know. Because I certainly don't believe that a trans person's identity is a social construct, it's something that starts in the womb, or maybe even in the gametes? I don't know, but this is a fascinating idea that someone with an advanced degree is probably working on. My point is that I have a hard time thinking gender isn't a performance, just because sex and

gender are two deeply intertwined but separate things (to me at least.) And that's okay. It doesn't mean it's fake. There are many documented cultures with more than just two genders. (okay, I am veering into Cult Anth 101 territory, so I will shut-up.)



greeneyedfem @SeeKateRun



@ktgrl: I recommend *The Riddle of Gender* for a science writer's investigation into trans identity.

[www.amazon.com]



Ms Meghan is Reppin' the Triforce @SeeKateRun



@ktgrl: Gender can be influenced by biological sex, but it is not the sole determining factor. At least, that's how I look at it and that's how I explained the difference to my intro to women's studies students.

Hide 2 replies



annieoakley

24 Sep 2010 3:35 PM



Saying "all gender is performance" does not mean gender can't be anything else.

Look, I can say all of these things:

"All gender is performance/performative."

"All gender is socialized and socially coded."

"All gender is influenced by family/trauma/Tickle Me Elmo."

In other words, making that statement doesn't imply that there's nothing else going on. And, FYI, something can be both inherent (whether constructed or not) *AND* performed.

promoted by [la.donna.pietra](#)



Dinosaurs and Nachos, girlfriend!

24 Sep 2010 3:29 PM



I must admit that the idea of gender being a performance is a bit new to me, so I apologize in advance if this is ignorant on my part. But this idea really worries me from a practical perspective.

Now, it may be an interesting debate to have internally (among feminists and such) but I worry about what will happen if this idea gets picked up and perverted by the mainstream. That is not to say that we shouldn't have this discussion. It's just a worry.

The idea that gender is always a performance reminds me too much of the guys who say "She wouldn't dress like that if she didn't want the attention." Clearly, these guys are not gonna understand the implications of gender being a performance any more than they will understand the myriad reasons a woman may dress a certain way that having nothing to do with how their dicks react to her clothing. And yet, these guys still have the ability to punish women for dressing a certain way-humiliation if the woman is provocative but not sexually attractive, anger if the woman could be sexually attractive but isn't trying hard enough, degradation if a woman appears too sexually attractive for the situation.... You get my drift.

If gender is a performance, then there are men (and women) in the world who will use this as an excuse to see my behavior as solely an act to try gain a certain type of attention.

**CapitolaTheMadcap** @Dinosaurs and Nachos, girlfriend!

@Dinosaurs and Nachos, girlfriend!: I think the problem here is that it did get picked up by the mainstream and perverted into something it isn't. Judith Butler (and a lot of other very insightful critics) have been debating this for twenty years. [\[en.wikipedia.org\]](http://en.wikipedia.org)

promoted by lurkerbynature

Hide 1 reply**laurendunitz**

24 Sep 2010 3:27 PM

Firstly, I was really excited when, in her piece, Julia Serrano informs the reader that she is trans. Serrano is right: "gender" as a concept is itself overdetermined, complicated, convoluted, and not just simply a "construct." Serrano's dissatisfaction and offense taken at this concept highlights to me the very real problem we (as Americans, though I'm sure this extends far wider) have dealing with the gender binary.

It seems like modern (mostly young) people navigate gender in far wider ways than ever before - yes, women now earn more PhD's than men, but there are also gazillions of men walking around in skinny jeans. And those are obviously just some completely superficial examples.

Gender can be a spectrum. Masculinities and femininities can be multiplicitous and multifaceted. So can sexed genital organs. When a baby is born, the doctor confirms or denies the existence of a penis, the baby is slapped on the ass and called "boy" or "girl," "male" or "female." When the baby is ambiguously sexed, the parents and doctor make a choice about which gender the child will live in - at least till he or she is old enough to have a say in his/her gender. If "man" and "woman" weren't such politically loaded terms, perhaps more parents would choose to leave their baby alone and allow it to grow up as it naturally would. If we ungender sexual organs, we can ungender society. This is not to say we will become an amorphous mamon (man/woman), but it is to say that far more gender performance and inhabitation can be achieved if people are not told to understand themselves within the constraints of a binary.

lurkerbynature approved this comment

**EponaWearsBoots**

24 Sep 2010 3:24 PM

I take issue with how people see the terms "masculine" and "feminine". Most of society sees men as masculine and woman as feminine. So if you equate being feminine with "batting eyelashes, curtsyng, and throwing like a girl" then so does society and society expects you to be those things. I don't know, it's very confusing. The ideas that come with "feminine" are not bad, but the notion that feminine is female and females must be those ideals is bad.

Agh, I'm rambling. Ignore me.

promoted by prismaticism is Team Bella

**CapitolaTheMadcap** @EponaWearsBoots

@EponaWearsBoots: That's the problem that gender performativity tries to address. It says that there are only a few "scripts" or predetermined routes by which each gender can be played out, and that anything that deviates from that script can't be perceived as that gender.

promoted by lurkerbynature

**EponaWearsBoots** @CapitolaTheMadcap

@CapitolaTheMadcap: Sometimes the world is just so frustrating. I wish we were just free to be ourselves, who ever we wanted, without people telling us we can't.

**CapitolaTheMadcap** @EponaWearsBoots

@EponaWearsBoots: From your lips to God's ears.



EponaWearsBoots @CapitolaTheMadcap



@CapitolaTheMadcap: Sigh. It's very hard to be 18 and start figuring out people suck.



CapitolaTheMadcap @EponaWearsBoots



@EponaWearsBoots: I know. But as you start to understand more, you can start to learn about the patterns that shape human behavior and it helps you to fight against the injustice.

You're well on your way already, if you're on Jezebel at 18!

Hide 5 replies



Lipstick_Feminist

24 Sep 2010 3:21 PM



Gender = society (cultural norms of what a girl/boy should act like).

Sex = biology.

Personality = psychology+ society + biology.

This article = confusing.

promoted by lurkerbynature



jdotmil @Lipstick_Feminist



@Lipstick_Feminist: Societal norms are gender /role/, not gender as the author describes it.

This is why we have, for example, butch transwomen and femme-y transmen. If being queer or trans simply meant rejecting the expected gender role, everyone who wants to be recognized as a gender different from that suggested by zir genetic or apparent sex would also fall in line with the gender roles of that target gender and be happy doing that.

When a young boy was accidentally castrated instead of circumcised, Dr. John Money told his parents to raise him as a girl; it would be easier for him. But despite socialization and hormones, that boy pursued transition back to external maleness when he grew up...and later committed suicide, likely at least in part because of the manipulation he was subjected to. He was a man. Others born looking like a man, born looking like a woman, or born with ambiguous genitals and surgically made to look female because it's "easier" and society will be brutal to someone with that ambiguity, are not in the very core of their essence the sex that they appear to be. Ignore the gender roles and that surety persists, and the world has butch transwomen and femme-y transmen. And queers like me, not feeling at all in tune with our biological sex (female here) nor necessarily with the opposite sex...but not necessarily accepting or rejecting parts of our expected gender role as a result, either.

promoted by la.donna.pietra

Hide 1 reply



xxaa

24 Sep 2010 3:18 PM



This seems like a good place to paraphrase Bruno Latour: "Houses are constructed, but they are real."

Saying things are performative or socially constructed should never be used to dismiss or minimize our experiences of gender which are very very real. Deconstructing gender and

gender norms instead should be about allowing us the freedom to act however we want, to question what it means to be a man or woman in our gendered society.

Anna North approved this comment
promoted by maurasaurus



maurasaurus @xxaa



@xxaa: The bright spot of my (horrible) philosophy of gender class was this one dude who raised his hand in the middle of our thousandth "all gender is constructed" discussion and pointed out that language is a social construct, too. Just because something is constructed doesn't mean it isn't real or important to people.

Hide 1 reply



regazza.di.lupo

24 Sep 2010 3:18 PM

I agree with a lot of what you are saying, but I feel a little confused, because most of the people I know who say that gender is not... "real", that it is a societal construction, are trans people or people supportive of trans people.

I have a few trans friends, and even if I didn't, I call people by the pronoun they choose to be called. I think it's really fucking insulting to call someone "she" if "she" has told you they prefer "he", and vice versa.

I feel like gender is more in one's mind and view of oneself than it is in one's physical body, but for a lot of people its more than that, it is physical too, and I know that many trans people WANT the physical to go with the mental.

I think when people say that gender is a construct a lot of them are saying it (well, those that are trans-aware) because they agree that a transperson should be viewed as they sex they feel that they are, not the genitalia they were born with.

Does any of this make sense? I feel like I'm probably missing the mark a bit, but I'm trying to understand.



muddgirl

24 Sep 2010 3:16 PM

I don't see the difference between socialization and performance. We are socialized to perform.

Still: anyone that tells a trans woman or trans man that their life is a performance should be ashamed of themselves.



lilydancing

24 Sep 2010 3:13 PM

Did anyone else notice the contradiction in being pissed that nobody recognizes her as female, but then wanting a "new way of speaking?"

I don't understand that at all.



Mushu the Educated Whale

24 Sep 2010 3:12 PM

As a woman who works in a male dominated field, desperately tries to be treated as one of the boys and fails: I'm pretty sure I need this book.

I thought my actions would speak louder than my vag, but some people can't get past my

gender. Lately I have come to realize that some people won't see me the way I see myself.

promoted by prismaticism is Team Bella



geekgeekgal

24 Sep 2010 3:12 PM ↻

I agree if we dumb down conversation about gender to saying all it is is "Performance" or "Drag" it is almost like victim blaming, as if women could just STOP performing like women and act like men and we'd all be fine.



HalloweenJacqueline @geekgeekgal



@geekgeekgal: But men perform their gender equally. This way of looking at things DISRUPTS the idea of male as default.

Hide 1 reply



TheMac

24 Sep 2010 3:10 PM ↻

I agree that the sentiment of gender being a performance is one of those smug, irritatingly collegiate sentiments like: "race is a construct". True, but inevitably an overly-academic way of addressing very real social concepts (and that's the matter at hand, really- that when you look at issues from a purely academic level, you downplay the social significance- i.e. the way these issues actively affect people in their everyday lives). All of that warrants conversation, but I don't think it makes the statement itself any less true.

I think the writer has very specific concerns about how the interpretation of gender affects how people see and react to her. And that's understandable; but whether people view your femininity as "legitimate" is a separate issue as to whether femininity itself is a biological/psychological or social construct. She needs to stop viewing her femininity as being inherently related to her self-identity and existence as a woman to get this concept.



Pierce Nichols

24 Sep 2010 3:08 PM ↻

@Cailin rua: Biology is not destiny, but it still matters enormously. Biology sets the ground rules for culture.

promoted by Norton



mtfmuffins

24 Sep 2010 3:06 PM ↻

Great selection to reprint, and a great book overall. I prefer Bornstein's classic original Gender Rebel - which in my opinion should be required reading - but this book does a lot to stimulate discourse. I'm on the fence on Julia's "gender as performance" meme, as I both agree and disagree. I don't think anyone can tell you who you are, but I do think we all "perform" pretty often. So there's a little of both, I'd say. Isn't that just called life? For the most part, it's like Woody Allen would say: eh. It's just like anything else.



rbeck

24 Sep 2010 3:02 PM ↻

Just, righto! Gender may be performa-tive, but it isn't voluntary. You can "Perform" certain things, but that isn't what is meant by the performativity of gender. Gender exists. I think of "performativity" as being the things I do in spite of myself.

Gender is so rich and complex, I'm dedicating my life to thinking about it. On the one hand I suppose I'm glad that Judith Butler's 1990 argument about the performativity of gender, something I spent ages trying to understand, has become "common sense" to so many. On the other, it disturbs me how warped the idea has become. I could go on and on about this.



Pickard.AL

24 Sep 2010 3:01 PM ↻

Very thought-provoking and edifying for me- both the excerpt and the reader comments.
Thanks!



Plum-Pie

24 Sep 2010 3:00 PM ↻

A good moment to brush up on the non-trans gender privilege checklist?

[www.oberlin.edu]

E.g.:

15) I do not have to choose between either invisibility ("passing") or being consistently "othered" and/or tokenized based on my gender.



Smeghead

24 Sep 2010 3:00 PM ↻

I think that the words "gender", "femininity", and "masculinity" have been hijacked by culture, and that really we need at least two words for each in order to talk about them at all.

There's conventional femininity that is assumed to be tied into gender, which is assumed to be based on your sex. But there's also a different kind of femininity that has nothing to do with what culture has decided is "for women", and which everyone possesses in varying degrees. It's the same with masculinity.

Obviously we all understand that none of this has to do with your genitals (except for when it does, in the world) so I'm not even going to address that.

It's hard to say what femininity and masculinity are outside of their cultural definitions, but I think that the cultural ideas of feminine and masculine are really only two of the many possible ideas of gender, and masculine/feminine really means something else. Because even in culturally accepted representations of gender, no woman is entirely feminine, and no man is entirely masculine.

I don't think that *all* gender is performance, but I think that a lot of it is, for a lot of people. It's like when you put on a play that is a re-enactment of an actual event. Just because an actor is pretending to be a real person does not mean that the real person ceases to exist. If you feel like a woman, but were born in the wrong body, that's one thing. But there are also a lot of women who were born women, and feel like women, but don't feel that the idea of "feminine" and "woman" being interchangeable fits them.

I think there is a BIG difference between "gender performance" and drag. It's like the difference between an actor and a rock star. An actor is pretending to be someone they are not. A rock star is being a very true version of themselves. Just because they are not that 100% of the time does not mean that who they are onstage, or who they are offstage, is not really who they are.

Basically... this is very difficult to talk about. But I really think that, while gender is real, there are definitely more than two variations, and because only two are accepted, for a lot of people, gender does end up being a performance. But not all the time, and not for everyone.



SlayBeau @Smeghead



@prismatism is Team Bella: Hrm...Rob Halford springs to mind. As a gay man his stage identity was that of the hyper-masculine, often anti-gay, "metal god." I can't recall a single instance of him performing the second part of that, but neither did he reveal his full identity which, correct me if I'm wrong, is part of the intolerable pain of being in the closet.

What else springs to mind is The Kinks "A Soap Opera," a concept album in which a rock star assumes the identity of a "normal" suburban office drone in order to collect material for his next record. The example either puts the lie to your assertion that rock stars are somehow "real" while actors are not or instead is the exception that proves the rule.

promoted by prismatism is Team Bella



Smeghead @SlayBeau



@SlayBeau: I'm not a Judas Priest fan, but didn't the person he was on stage mirror who he was offstage? What I mean is, was there a time when he was out in his "real life", but still closeted onstage? It seems like even in that case it's an example of the same struggle gay people go through everywhere, but in a different setting - out at home, closeted at work. I'm sorry if I'm not understanding your point.

I really meant, though, someone like David Bowie or Prince, where what might seem like a persona is actually a truth about themselves.

I don't think it's possible for anyone to present themselves in their entirety at any given moment.



SlayBeau @Smeghead



@prismatism is Team Bella: Maybe it is I who misunderstood you, but I was responding to your penultimate paragraph in which you asserted that being an actor is not like being a rock star, as far as performativity of identity goes.

Halford was closeted for a very long time, on and off stage. Closeted at work AND at home. As a rock star he had a public identity, which is not the same thing as a stage identity, and his public persona matched fan expectations in the main for 20+ years. I imagine he had a similar "private" identity to all closeted gays.

I guess I'm just trying to avoid essentializing identity. David Bowie was perhaps freer to show a "more real" part of himself than Halford because of the genre he chose to perform in. But look at country music. It is still a huge deal when a country singer comes out of the closet.

But I think at this point we might be talking at cross purposes. promoted by prismatism is Team Bella



Smeghead @SlayBeau



@SlayBeau: Well, I think I'm getting all wrapped up in my own analogy.

I think that in that case it actually would be considered acting. Because you can act while performing as a rock star (which is something that is "real"), but if you are acting, no matter how good of an actor you are, you will not actually be the thing you are pretending to be - because it's the nature of the act of acting to not really be it.

Rob Halford would be closer to "performing gender" in the way Julia Serano (I think) was describing it, a concept that she objected to (though I don't really understand her argument, because there seem to be some contradictions). I was trying to distinguish between something like that, behaving as if you were who people expect you to be, and doing drag, because it's not

true that a drag queen actually wants to be a woman, *or* that their drag is purely a performance in the sense we're talking about here (of course, it's personal, but this is what I've experienced most often to be true). So it is more like someone like David Bowie, who can present himself in many different ways, and even have an entirely different personality onstage from how he is offstage, but none of it is "fake". And there are many people for whom that is true, whether they are "performers" by profession or not.

It's really hard to talk about because "performance" is being used to refer to a lot of different things, and is being understood in a lot of different ways. But I hope that makes sense.

*Edit

Obviously drag queens who perform as other people are performing.

This is very complicated.

Hide 4 replies



Ismone

24 Sep 2010 2:59 PM ↻

This is a powerful piece.

But let me just say, although I won't dismiss Julia's lived experience of her gender, for me, gender is performance. I don't really want to be a man or a woman. I don't want to make the effort to be androgynous, either.

So, both/and. For Julia, gender is more than performance, there is something of a gender identity there that is deeply meaningful to her and who she is. For me, most of my experience with gender identity has to do not with my own, but with the one others try to put me in. With acting femmey enough or butch enough to fit the situation I'm in. I'd rather just do what I want to do without worrying about the (gendered) aspects of social signalling, but I don't have that choice. Maybe some of this is privilege, but I think it has more to do with how I construct my own identity.

promoted by prismaticism is Team Bella



carcosa

24 Sep 2010 2:57 PM ↻

Wow. Thank you. This helped make a tough day a little better for me.

promoted by messybessy



lurkerbynature

24 Sep 2010 2:56 PM ↻

Can I have oversimplification and misquotes for \$500?

Performance.

Performative.

Two different words.

Another example of a performative: "I take you to be my lawfully wedded . . .".

Saying something is a performative is not saying that it isn't assigned, culturally entrenched, and continually reinforced from all directions. It's not saying it isn't *real*.



oudemia @lurkerbynature



@lurkerbynature: Ding ding ding. It doesn't mean it's not real and neither does it mean that one can control every aspect of said performance. (Performance is a joint enterprise, and other

people's treatment of and reaction to one *is part of the performance*.)



CapitolaTheMadcap @lurkerbynature



@lurkerbynature: YES.



lilydancing @lurkerbynature



@lurkerbynature: Thank you! This person seems to be condemning "gender studies" (and performance studies for that matter) without having any idea what that entails.



Gnatalby @lurkerbynature



@lurkerbynature: Exactly, nor is it saying it isn't important or that it should be entirely done away with.

I love a lot of Serano's work, but this essay seems very shallow and intentionally obtuse.



highoffpixels @lurkerbynature



@lurkerbynature: this, QFT, etc.



diehausfrau @lurkerbynature



@lurkerbynature: thank you. This purposefully misunderstands Butler's (and others) points on gender performativity.



PhDork @lurkerbynature



@lurkerbynature: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.



curlsandwhey @lurkerbynature



@lurkerbynature: I was going to comment: "Looks like someone didn't finish Gender Trouble." This is why Bornstein's speech at a conference I attended literally made me roll my eyes. It was vast oversimplification. It was a summation of post-modern theory in two powerpoint slides. And this is a misreading of Butler and a reification of people who misquote Gender Trouble. Do you want me to quote? I WILL QUOTE. AND I WILL QUOTE ACCURATELY.

promoted by Hiroine Protagonist

Hide 8 replies



greeneyedfem

24 Sep 2010 2:55 PM



I am so, so happy to see Julia Serano on Jezebel. Run-don't-walk to get your hands on *Whipping Girl* if you haven't already. And the *Gender Outlaws* looks AMAZING.

The "gender is performance" line does get used -- and mis-used -- to dismiss people's very real and painful experiences with gender expectations and what feels intrinsically, deeply true for them.

Let's stop trying to deconstruct gender into nonexistence, and instead start celebrating it as inexplicable, varied, profound, and intricate.

YES. I want a world where EVERYONE -- gay straight bi trans cis man woman masculine feminine and every permutation thereof -- can freely, safely, and without shame inhabit the

gender identity they feel is true for them, as individuals -- no matter what sex they were assigned at birth, no matter their anatomy, and no matter how it might change over the course of their life.

Everyone should have the freedom to find their own place on the masculine/feminine spectrum without coercion or malice or shame. And I think if the expectations and pressures for men and women/boys and girls were broken down, there would be a flourishing of diverse gender identities, not tied to anatomy. And that would be a beautiful thing.



YoungBayardRustin @greeneyedfem

@greeneyedfem (MzJ+SG deserve stars): You were sent here to inspire me weren't you?

promoted by greeneyedfem (MzJ+SG deserve stars)



greeneyedfem @YoungBayardRustin

@YoungBayardRustin: *blush* I'm not sure, but I'll take it!



YoungBayardRustin @greeneyedfem

@greeneyedfem (MzJ+SG deserve stars): I think you were. :-)

Hide 3 replies



PrisonBreakShaker

24 Sep 2010 2:52 PM

You know, as some one who studies gender at a grad level (albeit from a historical and transnational context), I can't say I have any interest on how these studies apply to me, personally. When I wake up in the morning, I don't feel like a woman or a man or anything in between, I just feel like me. I wear usually wear feminine clothes for purely aesthetic reasons in that I enjoy the art of fashion, but I don't feel at a loss when I'm wearing no bra and the husband's boxer shorts to the gas station for a 40 (did I mention I'm also classy?).

I don't get it, at all, and part of that may be that I'm so entrenched with the privilege of being comfortable in my own body (save for the usual insecurities that I think are pretty rife with American womanhood) that I have no context for it. But here's the rub- it's not for me to get. It's none of my fucking business why trans people are trans. Science doesn't have all the answers yet about gender, but what we do know is that people can get horribly anxious or depressed if they feel a different gender than their sex.

I guess what I'm saying is, it's okay to admit you don't have a handle on gender, because it's really confusing, and no one really does. What's more important is that you listen with good faith and not make assumptions or develop a hard line that discounts some one's experience.

promoted by crocuta



crocuta @PrisonBreakShaker

@PrisonBreakShaker: I think that sense of "just feeling like me" is quite strongly informed by the messages about gender we've been getting since birth, though.

For example, I also like the aesthetic of feminine clothing, and today I'm wearing the girliest of retro dresses. However, I do think that my preference can't be separated from the cultural and social associations I unconsciously attach to such clothing. If I'd grown up seeing, say, long, loose robes represented as part of what makes a woman attractive and appropriately feminine, I might be dressed like a Bedouin instead of a 50's housewife today.

 **PrisonBreakShaker** @crocuta

@crocuta: That was what i was trying to say in the second paragraph, but framed in the context of privilege. It's totally possible that I don't think about it, because I've never been put in a position where I have to. If you've always "fit" into what's expected, how can you truly say what actually makes sense to you and what you take for granted?

It's so innate at this point that I can't separate condition from preference, nor do I think we can perform that experiment, because we just don't have that kind of genderless vacuum.

Hide 2 replies

 **CapitolaTheMadcap**

24 Sep 2010 2:52 PM

I may be stupid but, isn't the way that the author *expresses* her gender the gender performance? Not the inherent sense of gender itself? Before gender can be performed, there needs to be a sense of the gender that needs to be performed in the first place. This could be internally-motivated (as the author suggests) or externally (given from parents). The idea of gender performance tells us that there are only certain scripts by which gender can be performed; anything that falls out of that script is therefore not construed as being of that gender. For example, there are only a limited number of ways in which femininity can be performed. Women who have traditionally male attributes - preferring women as sexual partners for instance - are seen as being "manly" because their performance of femaleness doesn't jive with the aforementioned gender scripts of what "female" traditionally means.

I would think, and tell me if I'm being stupid, trans people would embrace the idea of gender performance theory, because - as people whose expressed gender doesn't jive with traditional male/female gender scripts - they are not perceived as being that gender. As in, society cannot imagine a type of femininity in which the female began life as a male so therefore they are not "really female".

Tell me if I'm being stupid. This might be one of my unexamined privileges.

promoted by prismaticism is Team Bella

 **Smeghead** @CapitolaTheMadcap

@CapitolaTheMadcap: I think you're right. And I think that if it were called "gender *expression*" instead of "gender performance", it would take away a lot of the bad feelings, because people feel that the word "performance" implies that it is a lie.

 **sacredprofanity** @Smeghead

@prismaticism is Team Bella: This. When we say 'performance,' that implies a work of fiction, or of acting - that what is being presented is not true. 'Gender expression' is a much, much better phrase for it. Nicely done.

promoted by prismaticism is Team Bella

 **OnTheLevel** @CapitolaTheMadcap

@CapitolaTheMadcap: So are you saying that you don't think of trans women as real women but as impersonators?

 **CapitolaTheMadcap** @OnTheLevel

@OnTheLevel: No, not at all. Quite the opposite. Try reading it again and get back to me.

**OnTheLevel** @CapitolaTheMadcap**@CapitolaTheMadcap:** Sorry, I assumed you were including yourself when you said society.**CapitolaTheMadcap** @OnTheLevel**@OnTheLevel:** It's cool.**YoungBayardRustin** @CapitolaTheMadcap**@CapitolaTheMadcap:** You were sent here to inspire me weren't you?**CapitolaTheMadcap** @YoungBayardRustin**@YoungBayardRustin:** If I am, then it makes this entire afternoon spent on the internet instead of cleaning my house totally worth it!**Hide 8 replies****vitajex**

24 Sep 2010 2:49 PM

Hmmm, this post will make me WWWAAAYYY more wary the next time someone introduces themselves as a 'performance artist'.

**geekgeekgal** @vitajex**@vitajex:** Um....a performance artist is a type of fine artists, i do not think it applies to what the author is talking about.

promoted by vitajex

**vitajex** @geekgeekgal**@geekgeekgal:** Sounds like someone may need to replace the batteries in their joke detector... :)**geekgeekgal** @vitajex**@vitajex:** I'm sorry I'm just touchy about how often performance artists are the brunt of jokes, like if it isn't bad enough that sex workers also calls themselves 'performance artists' let me tell you its hard for a performance artist to actually be seen as a legit artist (as if women in the art world didn't have enough to stand against). Just try writing on a customs form that you are entering a country to perform as a performance artist and watch as the police come to search your luggage. :(

promoted by vitajex

**vitajex** @geekgeekgal**@geekgeekgal:** That's why I don't refer to myself as a performance artist, but rather a smuggler-
SHIT! I mean 'juggler'!
JUGGLER!!!**geekgeekgal** @vitajex**@vitajex:** yeah maybe I'd have better luck if I just said I was a sex worker. Maybe they'd think I was an artist.**janiejones56** @geekgeekgal

@geekgeekgal: But it brings up something I was thinking about: rather than saying gender is performance, maybe we should say that gender is art. "Performance" to me implies something done for commercial or strategic reasons, while "art" implies an external manifestation, possibly even a performance, that comes from the core identity of the artist, his/her values, feelings, and worldview. It may still be too limiting to say that gender is art, but I like it better than the other.



geekgeekgal @janiejones56



@janiejones56: I agree there are too many types of 'performance' to understand what the calling of 'performance of identity' is actually gaining. I feel that it simplifies nuance so that it seems as though we have a stronger choice in the matter than we do. I could be asleep and have no agency at all, and my body's anatomy would give the world my performance for me. I wish there was a way to describe it in a catch phrase that line, but I think its why its better to NOT dumb being a woman down to a catch phrase.

Hide 7 replies



magicwaffle

24 Sep 2010 2:49 PM



Gender may not be performance, but personality in general is performance.

It is reacting to situations in a manner that you decide best fits.

That means you may sometimes have to go against your better judgment for the benefit of the specific scenario in which you are embroiled.

Does that make it "fake?" No.

Performance does not mean "fake."

The performance is who you are to everyone else. It is your facade, but it is still a very real representation of your inner soul.

The performance is not a crutch or a lie. It is a conduit through which you create the impression you want to leave behind.

In my case, without the "performance," I would sit mutely and observe, thinking my complex thoughts about the world and sharing nothing.

The performance is my lifeline to the rest of humanity. It is a requirement to be anything other than an impulse following automaton.

Edit - PS: I think you are awesome for being who you are when others would ask you to be someone else. I'm glad you wrote this column.

promoted by wtfox?!



lolilove

24 Sep 2010 2:48 PM



I agree with this article, specifically in how the author makes the reader see from her perspective regarding Gender. As a black woman I can relate when people claim to be "colorblind". Yes, you're colorblind because color doesn't matter to you. Why? Because you are of the privileged majority.

However, what I don't agree with is the idea that "Gender being performance" is false. It isn't

false. Just because something is a performance doesn't make it fake or fictitious. At least that's how I see it. The issue here is that obviously a person who is born a specific gender and lives it their whole lives won't see gender the same way as a person who had to become the gender physically to match what they feel on the inside.

I feel that the author is discrediting an idea based on her experience, which is valid but one sided. Gender can be performance but it can also be innate to another person. It all depends on experience. The author is also distorting another view to bring legitimacy to her view which is problematic.

The problem is we cannot look outside of ourselves and our society. If the gender lines were not drawn the way they are, would being trans even be as much of issue to the author? We have no way of knowing.

I believe the author's argument is valid but there are many ways to see gender. Instead of discrediting one view, why don't we acknowledge different schools of thought. But I am aware, in a respect, that I'm coming from a privileged standpoint. I was born female and I consider myself feminine...It's all so gray....



Hippopotame is leaked.

24 Sep 2010 2:43 PM ↻

@Cailin rua: One of the problems here (in the way people use performative) is that it seems as if the performance is voluntary (today I'll be hyper-feminine!). No decent performance theorist has ever argued that there is a lot of subjective choice involved in gender performativity. So when people equate performance with choice of role, of course they have a very limited (and wrongheaded) view.

promoted by Hiroine Protagonist



YoungBayardRustin

24 Sep 2010 2:42 PM ↻

@Cailin rua: <3



skahammer

24 Sep 2010 2:42 PM ↻

Help, I kind of got lost here. I think I understand what is meant by the "performance discourse" of gender -- that the socially-constructed gender roles applied to someone occasionally depend on that person's choice of voluntary signifying activities to pursue.

But I missed some crucial step on the way to "This notion of gender as performance is making my life harder." G-as-P is just a critique, which like all critiques is illuminating in some contexts and not in others.

If the G-as-P critique truly doesn't illuminate anything about you *personally*, then people who try to apply it to you aren't oppressing you with the critique, are they? They're just failing to illuminate anything -- their critical efforts are coming to nothing. If other bad things are happening to you, it's not because of the critique -- it's because these folks are doing something else to you besides applying the critique...aren't they?



la.donna.pietra

24 Sep 2010 2:41 PM ↻

I am reminded of the time my gay male professor cheerfully gave a lecture on how sex has nothing to do with reproduction while I sat in the audience and desperately prayed that my period would show up. Maybe in the abstract, dude, and maybe for you, but not across the board.

**skahammer** @la.donna.pietra**@la.donna.pietra:** Heh. "In the beginning was nature."**Atomic B** @la.donna.pietra

@la.donna.pietra: Interesting. I think for heterosexual females sex and reproduction are pretty inexplicably linked. Or at least personally I've found no way to have sex without constantly having reproduction at the back of my mind - birth control, missed periods, etc. I can understand why a gay man would have no familiarity with that experience, though. I guess it's just a reminder that sometimes when you're theorizing it's really important to step outside of your own perspective and consider what it's like for people with totally different experiences.

**la.donna.pietra** @Atomic B

@Atomic B: Even back when I was getting it on with women, I was still thinking about birth control--namely, that I didn't need to use it, and wasn't that awesome?

**Atomic B** @la.donna.pietra

@la.donna.pietra: Good point, if you're a woman (or girl) who's ever even vaguely considered sex with a man an option then birth control will be on your mind, whether or not you actually have sex with men. And I'd say most of us have at least had the possibility cross our minds, since it seems like all sex ed classes are based on the strict assumption that all kids are heterosexual. Oh, and that should be "inextricably" not "inexplicably"! Oops.

Hide 4 replies**YoungBayardRustin**

24 Sep 2010 2:40 PM

So if you are young trans child in a society that says women should have short hair do you get mad when your parents force you to grow it out?

I don't think you are being honest enough in this post. You aren't willing to admit how even transgender identity is influenced by societies gender norms and expectations.

I am the first person to stick of for trans rights but I take issue with trans people trying to assert that there very existence proves that gender isn't a social construction.

The notion that your trans identity is somehow less because you aren't able to express the gender norms that society says you should with a female gender is troubling to me.

If you self identify as a woman then you are a woman and any performance or lack of performance won't change that aspect of your being.

promoted by Rare Affinity

**Lux Alptraum** @YoungBayardRustin

@YoungBayardRustin: Yes, exactly.

Though I don't wish to question anyone's self-identified gender, I do think it's interesting to witness the shift that's occurred over the past few decades in what can broadly (and somewhat inaccurately) be defined as the "lesbian" community. Several decades ago, the community was exclusively divided into butches and femmes, the former adopting traits that would be considered "masculine," while the latter were more "feminine," but all identifying as women. Flash forward to now, when there's greater awareness of transidentity, and many people who

might have identified as butch women back in the eighties are now identifying as FTMs and genderqueers.

Now, there are a couple explanations for this possibility: it is, of course, possible that with the rise of trans awareness, people who previously lacked the vocabulary to describe their situation now have more accurate terminology that they are now applying. It's also possible that with the rise of trans identity, notions of gender have ironically gotten more rigid: if you have tendencies towards "masculine" behavior, then you are in fact a man on the inside, and not simply a woman with a broader concept of what it means to a woman.

Now, again, I have no desire to debate the "validity" of anyone's gender identity, and I think that people should be free to identify as hes, shes, its, zes, or whatever makes them happy. But I have to agree that stating that that one's fixed notions of the self line up with what society has defined as a proscribed gender role is not an argument than gender is not performative.



Norton @YoungBayardRustin



@YoungBayardRustin: I think this is a very good point. When a child begs "Don't make me cut my hair" or "Don't make me wear a dress" they are saying "Please don't make me perform this role" or "Please let me continue to perform the role I wish." You're acknowledging the importance of an audience in your identity.

Gender is complicated. So is community. Nothing is separate from society, not even our most personal identities.



YoungBayardRustin @Lux Alptraum



@Lux Alptraum: You continue to broaden my world view!



lil gaywad @Lux Alptraum



@Lux Alptraum: Ok Lux, I gotta disagree with you somewhat. I can see how you'd observe the FTM thing as being a trend in the lesbian community or something..sometimes it feels that way for me as a trans man. But I have to say, most trans guys these days do not seem to come from the traditional butch lesbian narrative. I see a lot who were married, straight women previously. I was a lesbian before I transitioned, but I was not really "butch" per se. I dressed like a sexy librarian, but that was all a "performance of female gender" for me, whereas inside I had always felt like I had a "male brain" whatever that means.

And genderqueer and trans are pretty fucking different. GQ is about gender, trans identity is about sex. You get gay trans men, bi trans men, straight trans men, butch trans men, femme trans men etc etc - we're a varied bunch.

The whole, trans men are just really butch women who don't realise they can just be masculine women is dangerous thinking. See this blog, by Dirt, a butch woman who has a vendetta against trans people: dirtywhiteboi67.blogspot.com I hate the whole butch = trans thing. When I started transitioning people questioned me, but assumed my best friend who is a butch woman was more likely to transition. We were both pretty offended. She is a woman, I'm not.

I could never ever live as a butch women, because I'm not one. I'm hardly a stereotypical butch man, either. I just do my thing. I'm wearing pink Y-fronts right now, with matching socks and an Aquaman t-shirt. I'm just me and I'm a dude and I've never been butch.

Anyway, this all hits pretty close to home, hence the long reply.

promoted by Lux Alptraum



LilGrasshopper @Lux Alptraum



@Lux Alptraum: Now, there are a couple explanations for this possibility: it is, of course, possible that with the rise of trans awareness, people who previously lacked the vocabulary to describe their situation now have more accurate terminology that they are now applying. It's also possible that with the rise of trans identity, notions of gender have ironically gotten more rigid: if you have tendencies towards "masculine" behavior, then you are in fact a man on the inside, and not simply a woman with a broader concept of what it means to a woman.

That is so very well put! I think both of those explanations could be true.



Lux Alptraum @lil gaywad



@lil gaywad: Oh, no, I didn't mean to say that all transmen are really butch women, because I absolutely don't think that--for instance, Buck Angel is *definitely* not a butch woman, in any sense. But I do think there are some people on the edges of each community who may once have identified as butch, but now identify as trans--possibly because the vocabulary has evolved, and possibly because of social pressure.

But the most important thing, in any case, is that people have a descriptor and an identity that they are comfortable with, and I'm very glad that you have found yours.

Hide 6 replies



AndPreciousLittleofT...

24 Sep 2010 2:40 PM



Thank you for this great and very nuanced piece. I think you've beautifully detailed the intersection between theory and practice in working out gender roles.

Is there a particular person or group that's promoting this "gender is performance" idea, or is this an accepted idea in the field?

I would imagine if you've had this concept drilled into you by earnest and well-meaning teachers, it might be hard to push back against what feels like an already established and accepted idea.



Shells @AndPreciousLittleofT...



@AndPreciousLittleofThat: The particular group would be existentialists, I imagine.



ada, or ardor @Shells



@Shells: And, more currently, Critical Theory



Pierce Nichols @AndPreciousLittleofT...



@AndPreciousLittleofThat: IME, you can't swing a dead cat in a feminist space without hitting someone who believes wholly, truly, deeply that all gender is performance.

I have to restrain myself from asking people where they think babies come from, because it never ends well. Biology isn't destiny, but it's not chopped liver, either.

promoted by AndPreciousLittleofThat

**AndPreciousLittleofT...** @Pierce Nichols

@Pierce Nichols: Wow. That's kinda crazy.

I can definitely see subscribing to the idea that *part* of gender is performance, but I'm immediately suspicious whenever I hear about an overarching, all-encompassing "theory of everything" in a field.

It's like looking at a cube from only one side and calling it a square.

Thank you!

**Ismone** @Pierce Nichols

@Pierce Nichols: The fact that I want to fuck men has nothing whatsoever to do with how femmemy or butch I want to be. I present my gender identity to get on in society, because I have to. Men that I'm in relationships with get me with a lot less of the externally imposed gender identity.

**lurkerbynature** @AndPreciousLittleofT...

@AndPreciousLittleofThat: It's a (relatively common) misinterpretation of Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity, which she describes in *Gender Trouble* and subsequent books. (It's a misinterpretation that pretty well pisses her off, from my interpretation of her very moderately worded comments and clarifications when I heard her give a lecture.)

[www.queertheory.com]

**AndPreciousLittleofT...** @lurkerbynature

@lurkerbynature: "The performativity of gender is meant to suggest--invoke--that gender is constituted by performative acts which repeated come to form, take shape, a "coherent" gender identity."

See, *that* I get. I can completely understand and endorse that idea, because it is about internalizing normative behavior, instead of externalizing a sort of facade or front. Or that's the way I'm reading it, at least.

That's kind of odd, because it seems that a lot of people are interpreting what she's saying in the exact opposite way of her original meaning.

Hide 7 replies

**LadybirdRamone**

24 Sep 2010 2:40 PM

Your doing it wrong if you believe anyone who thnks about gender as performative is not: "trying to deconstruct gender into nonexistence, and instead start celebrating it as inexplicable, varied, profound, and intricate."

Either the people you talk to aren't clear, or this is a major reading comprehension fail.

That said, all the stuff above that wasn't attacking other women and their thoughts, beliefs, and lifestyles was good.

**pastanaut**

24 Sep 2010 2:37 PM

Excellent article.

Something that helped me see how endemic gender perceptions are to how we perceive and treat people was reading the Ursula LeGuin book, "Left Hand of Darkness." The book explores gender by presenting a race of people without gender, except when they are 'in heat.' Early in the book she says (and I'm paraphrasing from memory), "What is the first question that you ask when a baby is born?" The main character's perceptions of people are constantly challenged by his internal desire to apply gender to them based on their behavior. It's fascinating, and made me see gender in a different way. It helps me see where Julia is coming from, and that her struggle with peoples' perceptions about her gender are as important as her own perceptions about her gender.

promoted by la.donna.pietra



colorisnteverything

24 Sep 2010 2:35 PM ↻

Good article. A lot of interesting tid-bits in here. I studied Gender Studies in my u-grad and it was a welcome break from poli sci monotony at times. Now in a PhD program for poli sci, I miss these discussions!

My favorite professor used "doing gender" instead because she said it was not a performance all of the time, but even when we don't realize it, we are "doing gender" and this can be a really complicated puzzle with no true binaries (although the media likes to tell us there are!).



adventure!

24 Sep 2010 2:35 PM ↻

This article is beautiful.



cand86

24 Sep 2010 2:34 PM ↻

This is such an awesome article, and Julia Serano is a great choice for a guest writer (i.e. more of this, please, more of this!).



StormsComing

24 Sep 2010 2:33 PM ↻

Friends of mine have a comic published in this book. I highly recommend picking it up. It's amazing!



daradoodle

24 Sep 2010 2:33 PM ↻

This is a vast misinterpretation of the idea of gender performativity. Performance and social construction are not just synonyms for 'fake' or 'fictitious', and they are not concepts that are inherently dismissive of the authenticity of someone's experience of gender. Of course there are people who misinterpret them, in equally if not more oversimplified ways. But to dismiss one of them major concepts of gender studies because some people can't read properly is just ridiculous. I don't see how the concept of performativity is dismissive of the experiences Julia Serano describes in this article.

I would appreciate this way more if there was some distinction between these concepts as they are expressed in actual texts, and the way soundbites are parroted back by people who choose not to use these ideas in an intellectually rigorous manner. I would also appreciate it a lot more it wasn't so generally dismissive of the value of studying gender in an academic way.



ParanoidGynoid @daradoodle



@daradoodle: Co-signed.



Hippopotame is leaked. @daradoodle



@daradoodle: Amen--I was logging on to write this very thing. Actually, what Serano describes is exactly what gender performativity is about (including the complexity and the questions about naturalization). Unfortunately, people who took 1 gender studies class or read a book often go about using the terminology of performance without understanding the real stakes involved and the complexity of the theory. Anyone who wants to learn more should start with Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* or books about her work.

However, the fact is that people do misuse the idea in order to over-simplify, and in that sense, I completely agree with Serano (even though that's not what performativity is really about). That's obviously where the critique lies; getting people to understand the complexity (whether they come at it through academic means or not).

promoted by lurkerbynature



YoungBayardRustin @daradoodle



@daradoodle: Can't we agree that gender is a social construct but also realize that it is a very important one?

promoted by crocuta



be_tandy @daradoodle



@daradoodle: This was my reaction too -- that performance does not equal false/fiction. Reminds me of Goffman -- arguably everything is performance, playing a role, etc. Perhaps living doesn't feel like performance any more for the author, since she is now playing the correct gender role? After all, I don't feel like I'm performing when I put on makeup and get dressed for work, but I'm arguably wearing face paint and a costume, too.



KLondike5 @daradoodle



@daradoodle: I think it's right and fair to critique the glib soundbite, but I agree that wholly dismissing the idea of gender as performative is dumbing down a complex idea itself.

I think the problem lies in saying that gender is *just* performance, as if self-expression is trivial. I think performance can be authentic self-expression. It doesn't have to be fake or a put-on.

If a musician performs a piece of music of their own choosing, it's understood that it means something to the performer, even though there's an audience too.

If a person is comfortable in their gender presentation, they are performing to 'music' of their own choosing.



PrisonBreakShaker @daradoodle



@daradoodle: That's a really excellent point. Performed doesn't mean "fake", and I'm always trying to tell people that.

promoted by KLondike5



wtfox?! @daradoodle



@daradoodle: Thanks for this; I definitely agree with your point that there needs to be a distinction made between sustained, complex discussions of performance and the use of performance in a reductive or generalist sense.

"Narrative" might also fall under the same rubric of terms that are sometimes treated lightly because of their association with the fictive. There are many, *many* narratives (social, cultural, personal) that, fictive as they are (in the sense that they are made things--and that's what fiction derives from, the term for something that was fashioned or constructed) that exert powerful influences on individuals and groups.

 **lurkerbynature** @Hippopotame is leaked.

@Hippopotame is sweating to the golden girls: Yes. Apparently the *"the somewhat snooty 'I-took-a-gender-studies-class-and-you-didn't'"* contingent never actually read Judith Butler. And neither has the author of the post.

I feel like next we're going to have an article featuring an impassioned dismissal of second wave feminism because somebody misquoted Andrea Dworkin again.

 **lilydancing** @daradoodle

@daradoodle: Thank you!!

 **FreudianNipSlip** @KLondike5

@KLondike5: *If a musician performs a piece of music of their own choosing, it's understood that it means something to the performer, even though there's an audience too.*

That is a lovely way to put it. Dismissing performance as fake is insulting, as our identity expression (usually called just 'performance') can be both an expression of internal self and a signaling to others regarding who we are and what we value. It is hard to truly separate those two dimensions of a person in reality.

promoted by KLondike5

 **eri401** @daradoodle

@daradoodle: Thanks. This article confused me because the author seemed to protest the single-handed treatment of gender identity...by contesting the theory that gender is not a biological, self-evident truth. Meh?

 **Hippopotame is leaked.** @lurkerbynature

@lurkerbynature: "Again" being the key word! Dworkin gets such a bum rap (and I do disagree with some of what she advocates but still respect the logic and power of her arguments).

promoted by lurkerbynature

 **lurkerbynature** @Hippopotame is leaked.

@Hippopotame is sweating to the golden girls: No kidding about the "again".

Yeah. I don't agree with some of her arguments either. But, she was a polemicist, so I suspect she'd be totally okay with that. And relish the debate.

OOH! Just came across a gorgeous quote from her:

"Feminists have a vision of women, even women, as individual human beings; and this vision annihilates the system of gender polarity in which men are superior and powerful. This is not a bourgeois notion of individuality; it is not a self-indulgent notion of individuality; it is the recognition that every human being lives a separate life in a separate body and dies alone. In

proposing "the individuality of each human soul," feminists propose that women are not their sex; nor their sex plus some other little thing—a liberal additive of personality, for instance; but that each life—including each woman’s life—must be a person’s own, not predetermined before her birth by totalitarian ideas about her nature and her function, not subject to guardianship by some more powerful class, not determined in the aggregate but worked out by herself, for herself. Frankly, no one much knows what feminists mean; the idea of women not defined by sex and reproduction is anathema or baffling. It is the simplest revolutionary idea ever conceived, and the most despised."

Andrea Dworkin. Right-Wing Women. "The Coming Gynocide." 1983.

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 **Victoria Humak** 24 Sep 2010 2:33 PM ↻

All the things you decided in the second full paragraph could not be explained by the concept of "gender as performance" actually can be explained by "gender as performance."

The thought that your performance is the only one relevant in that type of scenario (and therefore all reactions are outside the grasp) could be explained by Performance Studies 101. Performance is not performance without an audience and your audience is always a part of the actual scene whether you want them to be or not.

 **pastanaut** @Victoria Humak ↻

@Victoria Humak: I disagree with you entirely. You can "act" like a girl all you want to, but if people don't perceive you as a girl, you will be treated differently. Did you read the third paragraph?
promoted by la.donna.pietra

Hide 1 reply

 **NefariousCAT** 24 Sep 2010 2:26 PM ↻

Great piece, from a perspective we could stand to hear more of. And yeah, any "All X is Y" statement about serious issues is, by nature, oversimplification.

