Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements that not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. The power of discourse to produce that which it names is thus essentially linked with the question of performativity. The performative is thus one domain in which power acts as discourse.

Importantly, however, there is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. This is less an “act,” singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power. Hence, the judge who authorizes and installs the situation he names (we shall call him “he,” figuring this model of authority as masculinist) invariably cites the law that he applies, and it is the power of this citation that gives the performative its binding or conferring power. And though it may appear that the binding power of his words is derived from the force of his will or from a prior authority, the opposite is more true: it is through the citation of the law that the figure of the judge’s “will” is produced and that the “priority” of textual authority is established. Indeed, it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act of the judge derives its binding power; that binding power is to be found neither in the subject of the judge nor in his will, but in the citational legacy by which a contemporary “act” emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions.

Where there is an “I” who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that “I” and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no “I” who stands behind discourse and executes its volition or will through discourse. On the contrary, the “I” only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated (to use the Althusserian term), and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the “I”; it is the transitive invocation of the “I.” Indeed, I can only say “I” to the extent that I have first been addressed, and that address has mobilized my place in speech; paradoxically, the discursive condition of social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject. Further, the impossibility of a full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one’s social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation. The “I” is thus a citation of the place of the “I” in speech, where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates: it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak.

How, if at all, is the notion of discursive resignification linked to the notion of gender parody or impersonation? If gender is a mimetic effect, is it therefore a choice or a dispensable artifice? If not, how did this reading of Gender Trouble emerge? There are at least two reasons for the misapprehension, one which I myself produced by citing drag as an example of performativity (taken then, by some, to be exemplary, that is, the example of performativity), and another which has to do with the political needs of a growing queer movement in which the publicication of theatrical agency has become quite central.

The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a “one” who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. This is a voluntarist account of gender which presumes a subject, intact, prior to its gendering. The sense of gender performativity that I meant to convey is something quite different.

Gender is performative insofar as it is the effect of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint. Social constraints, taboos, prohibitions, threats of punishment operate in the ritualized repetition of norms, and this repetition constitutes the temporalized scene of gender construction and destabilization. There is no subject who precedes or enacts this repetition of norms. To the extent that this repetition creates an effect of gender uniformity, a stable effect of masculinity or femininity, it produces and destabilizes the notion of the subject as well, for the subject only comes into intelligibility through...
the matrix of gender. Indeed, one might construe repetition as precisely that which undermines the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject in language.

There is no subject who is “free” to stand outside these norms or to negotiate them at a distance; on the contrary, the subject is retroactively produced by these norms in their repetition, precisely as their effect. What we might call “agency” or “freedom” or “possibility” is always a specific political prerogative that is produced by the gaps opened up in regulatory norms, in the interpellating work of such norms, in the process of their self-repetition. Freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power.

Gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today. Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged. The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate.

[…] It may seem, however, that there is a difference between the embodying or performing of gender norms and the performative use of language. Are these two different senses of “performativity,” or do they converge as modes of citationality in which the compulsory character of certain social imperatives becomes subject to a more promising deregulation? Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones which are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond. In this sense, the initiatory performative, “It’s a girl!”, anticipates the eventual arrival of the sanction, “I pronounce you man and wife.” Hence, also, the peculiar pleasure of the cartoon strip in which the infant is first interpellated into discourse with “It’s a lesbian!” Far from an essentialist joke, the queer appropriation of the performative mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law and its expropriability.

To the extent that the naming of the “girl” is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain “girling” is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a “girl,” however, who is compelled to “cite” the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no “one” who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a “one,” to become viable as a “one,” where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms.

It is in terms of a norm that compels a certain “citation” in order for a viable subject to be produced that the notion of gender performativity calls to be rethought. And precisely in relation to such a compulsory citationality that the theatricality of gender is also to be explained. Theatricality need not be conflated with self-display or self-creation. Within queer politics, indeed, within the very signification that is “queer,” we read a resignifying practice in which the desanctioning power of the name “queer” is reversed to sanction a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy. Paradoxically, but also with great promise, the subject who is “queered” into public discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds takes up or cites that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition. This kind of citation will emerge as theatrical to the extent that it mimes and renders hyperbolic the discursive convention that it also reverses. The hyperbolic gesture is crucial to the exposure of the homophobic “law” which can no longer control the terms of its own abjuring strategies.

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