

Gender Performance: The TransAdvocate interviews Judith Butler

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Abstract

Judith Butler is a preeminent gender theorist and has played an extraordinarily influential role in shaping modern feminism. They've written extensively on gender, and her concept of gender performativity is a central theme of both modern feminism and gender theory. Butler's essays and books include Performative Acts and Gender Constitution (1988), Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion [...]

Article



Judith Butler is a preeminent gender theorist and has played an extraordinarily influential role in shaping modern feminism. They've written extensively on gender, and her concept of gender performativity is a central theme of both modern feminism and gender theory. Butler's essays and books include Performative Acts and Gender Constitution (1988), Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (1993) and Undoing Gender (2004).

However, the concept of gender performativity has been used - and some would assert - abused to support a number of positions that misconstrue Butler's work. Therefore, I wanted to ask Butler what they really think about gender and the trans experience. Along the way, Butler specifically addresses

TERFs and the work of Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond.

Cristan Williams: You spoke about the surgical intervention many trans people undergo as a “very brave transformation.” Can you talk about that?

Judith Butler: It is always brave to insist on undergoing transformations that feel necessary and right even when there are so many obstructions to doing so, including people and institutions who seek to pathologize or criminalize such important acts of self-definition. I know that for some feels less brave than necessary, but we all have to defend those necessities that allow us to live and breathe in the way that feels right to us. Surgical intervention can be precisely what a trans person needs - it is also not always what a trans person needs. Either way, one should be free to determine the course of one’s gendered life.

CW: I think it’s safe to say that many gender theorists are controversial in one way or another. Some have lumped your work together with the work of gender theorists such as Sheila Jeffreys, who wrote:

[Transsexual surgery] could be likened to political psychiatry in the Soviet Union. I suggest that transsexualism should best be seen in this light, as directly political, medical abuse of human rights. The mutilation of healthy bodies and the subjection of such bodies to dangerous and life-threatening continuing treatment violates such people’s rights to live with dignity in the body into which they were born, what Janice Raymond refers to as their “native” bodies. It represents an attack on the body to rectify a political condition, “gender” dissatisfaction in a male supremacist society based upon a false and politically constructed notion of gender difference... Recent literature on transsexualism in the lesbian community draws connections with the practices of sadomasochism.

Can you talk about the ways in which your views might differ?

JB: I have never agreed with Sheila Jeffreys or Janice Raymond, and for many years have been on quite the contrasting side of feminist debates. She appoints herself to the position of judge, and she offers a kind of feminist policing of trans lives and trans choices. I oppose this kind of prescriptivism, which seems to me to aspire to a kind of feminist tyranny.

If she makes use of social construction as a theory to support her view, she very badly misunderstands its terms. In her view, a trans person is “constructed” by a medical discourse and therefore is the victim of a social construct. But this idea of social constructs does not acknowledge that all of us, as bodies, are in the active position of figuring out how to live with and against the constructions - or norms - that help to form us. We form ourselves within the vocabularies that we did not choose, and sometimes we have to reject those vocabularies, or actively develop new ones. For instance, gender assignment is a “construction,” and yet many genderqueer and trans people refuse those assignments in part or in full. That refusal opens the way for a more radical form of self-determination, one that happens in solidarity with others who are undergoing a similar struggle.

One problem with that view of social construction is that it suggests that what trans people feel about what their gender is, and should be, is itself “constructed” and, therefore, not real. And then the feminist police comes along to expose the construction and dispute a trans person’s sense of their lived reality. I oppose this use of social construction absolutely, and consider it to be a false, misleading, and oppressive use of the theory.

CW: Recently, Gloria Steinem wrote:

So now I want to be unequivocal in my words: I believe that transgender people, including those who have transitioned, are living out real, authentic lives. Those lives should be celebrated, not questioned. Their health care decisions should be theirs and theirs alone to make. And what I wrote decades ago does not reflect what we know today as we move away from only the binary boxes of “masculine” or “feminine” and begin to live along the full human continuum of identity and expression.

Would you comment on Steinem’s statement?

JB: I agree completely that nothing is more important for transgender people than to have access to excellent health care in trans-affirmative environments, to have the legal and institutional freedom to pursue their own lives as they wish, and to have their freedom and desire affirmed by the rest of the world. This will happen only when transphobia is overcome at the level of individual attitudes and prejudices and in larger institutions of education, law, healthcare, and kinship.

CW: What do you think people misrepresent most about your theories and why?

JB: I do not read very much of those writings, so I cannot say. I do know that some people believe that I see gender as a “choice” rather than as an essential and firmly fixed sense of self. My view is actually not that. No matter whether one feels one’s gendered and sexed reality to be firmly fixed or less so, every person should have the right to determine the legal and linguistic terms of their embodied lives. So whether one wants to be free to live out a “hard-wired” sense of sex or a more fluid sense of gender, is less important than the right to be free to live it out, without discrimination, harassment, injury, pathologization or criminalization - and with full institutional and community support. That is most important in my view.

CW: Do you think that humans have an innate and subjective experience of having a body? If so, would part of that experience also include having a body with primary sex characteristics?

JB: Most of what people say about these matters is rather speculative. I know that some subjective experiences of sex are very firm and fundamental, even unchangeable. They can be so firm and unchanging that we call them “innate”. But given that we report on such a sense of self within a social world, a world in which we are trying to use language to express what we feel, it is unclear what language does that most effectively. I understand that “innate” is a word that conveys the sense of something hard-wired and constitutive. I suppose I would be inclined to wonder whether other vocabularies might do the job equally well. I never did like the assertion of the “innate” inferiority of women or Blacks, and I understood that when people tried to talk that way, they were trying to “fix” a social reality into a natural necessity. And yet, sometimes we do need a language that refers to a basic, fundamental, enduring, and necessary dimension of who we are, and the sense of sexed embodiment can be precisely that.

CW: Some (such as Milton Diamond) assert that there seems to be a genetic issue that can lead to transsexualism. What are your thoughts about such assertions?

JB: In the works by Milton Diamond that I have read, I have had to question the way he understands genetics and causality. Even if a gene structure could be found, it would only establish a possible

development, but would in no way determine that development causally. Genetics might be yet another way of getting to that sense of being “hard-wired” for a particular sex or gender. My sense is that we may not need the language of innateness or genetics to understand that we are all ethically bound to recognize another person’s declared or enacted sense of sex and/or gender. We do not have to agree upon the “origins” of that sense of self to agree that it is ethically obligatory to support and recognize sexed and gendered modes of being that are crucial to a person’s well-being.

CW: If “gender” includes the way in which we subjectively experience, contextualize, and communicate our biology, do you think that living in a world without “gender” is possible?

JB: Sometimes there are ways to minimize the importance of gender in life, or to confuse gender categories so that they no longer have descriptive power. But other times gender can be very important to us, and some people really love the gender that they have claimed for themselves. If gender is eradicated, so too is an important domain of pleasure for many people. And others have a strong sense of self bound up with their genders, so to get rid of gender would be to shatter their self-hood. I think we have to accept a wide variety of positions on gender. Some want to be gender-free, but others want to be free really to be a gender that is crucial to who they are.

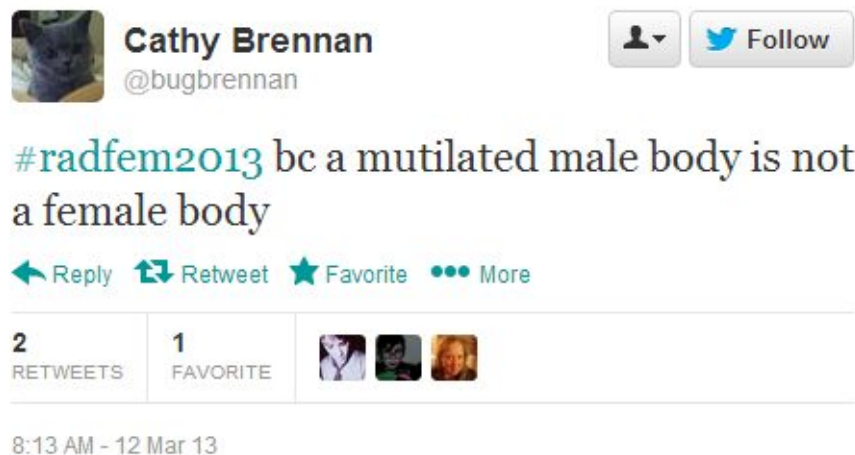


Figure 1. CB11[1]

CW: I have seen where - especially online - people who identify as “gender critical feminists” (TERFs) assert that transwoman are merely mutilated men. What are your thoughts about using “gender critical feminism” to make such assertions?

JB: I do not know this term, but I reject totally the characterization of a transwoman as a mutilated man. First, that formulation presumes that men born into that sex assignment are not mutilated. Second, it once again sets up the feminist as the prosecutor of trans people. If there is any mutilation going on in this scene, it is being done by the feminist police force who rejects the lived embodiment of transwomen. That very accusation is a form of “mutilation” as is all transphobic discourse such as these. There is a rather huge ethical difference between electing surgery and being faced with transphobic condemnation and diagnoses. I would say that the greatest risk of mutilation that trans people have comes directly from transphobia.

CW: Many trans people assert that women/females can have a penis and that men/males can have a

vagina. What are your thoughts about that?

JB: I see no problem with women having a penis, and men having a vagina. People can have whatever primary characteristics they have (whether given or acquired) and that does not necessarily imply what gender they will be, or want to be. For others, primary sexual characteristics signify gender more directly.

Intersectionality may well sound like some unfortunate bowel complaint resulting in copious use of a colostomy bag, and indeed it does contain a large amount of ordure. Wikipedia defines it as ‘the study of intersections between different disenfranchised groups or groups of minorities; specifically, the study of the interactions of multiple systems of oppression or discrimination’, which seems rather mature and dignified. In reality, it seeks to make a manifesto out of the nastiest bits of Mean Girls, wherein non-white feminists especially are encouraged to bypass the obvious task of tackling the patriarchy’s power in favour of bitching about white women’s perceived privilege in terms of hair texture and body shape. - Julie Burchill

CW: Do you have any thoughts about “intersectionality?”

JB: If you are referring to the important contribution of black feminist theory, then I have many thoughts. It has made an important contribution to social and political analysis, asking all of us to think about what assumptions of race and class we make when we speak about “women” or what assumptions of gender and race we make when we speak about “class.” It allows us to unpack those categories and see the various kinds of social formations and power relations that constitute those categories.

CW: It has been asserted that if one controls the way one identifies and behaves, that one can change the way one experiences their body. For example:

He could see that I was possessed of this thing, which only now, I realize was demonic. I knelt on the study floor, in tears, I was choking, forces were telling me not to do it, to walk out; freedom as a woman awaited me, after all, I had made such progress. I fought back, I cried aloud, I repented, I rebuked what had gone on in my life... All this happened 18 months ago... I gave them my suitcases of dresses, clothes, make up etc. It made me feel sick, and it was a major thing for me to do. I had to get rid of all that had held me before. They disposed of the stuff. I stopped having manicures, and cut my nails short, I grew a small beard. I threw all the [hormone] tablets away, and turned away from anything that had to do with my desires. I asked my Pastor for a verse that I could look at every day and enjoy my new freedom as a man, a father and a husband. I put a piece of paper next to my bed, with encouraging verses, which I read every morning when I got out of bed. I knew that the woman inside was dead. The power of Christ had destroyed her, and all she stood for. Eighteen months on, the devil still tries to persuade me, but he knows that I will not go down that path, as the consequences for my family would be immense. I am accountable to several people, and I am enjoying my manhood. -Sam’s Story

In the above example, the individual has made an ongoing daily ritualistic practice of denial and repression in the belief that it will change the way they experience their body. In what seems to be a somewhat similar approach, Janice Raymond wrote:

This paper has argued that the issue of transsexualism is an ethical one that has profound social and

moral ramifications. Transsexualism itself is a deeply moral question rather than a medicaltechnical answer. In concluding, I would list some suggestions for change that address the more social and ethical arguments I have raised in the preceding pages.

While there are many who feel that morality must be built into law, I believe that the elimination of transsexualism is not best achieved by legislation prohibiting transsexual treatment and surgery but rather by legislation that limits it and by other legislation that lessens the support given to sex-role stereotyping, which generated the problem to begin with...

It would raise questions such as the following: is individual gender suffering relieved at the price of role conformity and the perpetuation of role stereotypes on a social level? In changing sex, does the transsexual encourage a sexist society whose continued existence depends upon the perpetuation of these roles and stereotypes? These and similar questions are seldom raised in transsexual therapy at present. - Raymond (1980), Technology on the Social and Ethical Aspects of Transsexual Surgery

In your understanding of “gender,” do you believe that either of these approaches - both focusing on controlling behavior (via god and religious counseling or legislation and stereotype counseling) - would be able to eliminate trans people?

JB: I think that it is incumbent on all of us to get rid of these approaches - they are painful, unnecessary, and destructive. Raymond sets herself up as the judge of what transsexuality is and is not, and we are already in a kind of moral prison as we read her work. What is much more important than any of these behaviorist or “moral” approaches are all the stories, poems, and testimonies, the theoretical and political works, that document the struggle to achieve embodied self-determination for individuals and for groups. What we need are poems that interrogate the world of pronouns, open up possibilities of language and life; forms of politics that support and encourage self-affirmation. And what we need is a political and joyous alternative to the behaviorist discourse, the Christian discourse on evil or sin, and the convergence of the two in forms of gender policing that [is] tyrannical and destructive.

CW: Do you think “sex” is a social construct?

JB: I think that there are a variety of ways of understanding what a social construct is, and we have to be patient with terms like these. We have to find a way of understanding how one category of sex can be “assigned” from both and another sense of sex can lead us to resist and reject that sex assignment. How do we understand that second sense of sex? It is not the same as the first - it is not an assignment that others give us. But maybe it is an assignment we give ourselves? If so, do we not need a world of others, linguistic practices, social institutions, and political imaginaries in order to move forward to claim precisely those categories we require, and to reject those that work against us?

CW: What, if anything, would you like trans people to take from your work?

JB: Gender Trouble was written about 24 years ago, and at that time I did not think well enough about trans issues. Some trans people thought that in claiming that gender is performative that I was saying that it is all a fiction, and that a person’s felt sense of gender was therefore “unreal.” That was never my intention. I sought to expand our sense of what gender realities could be. But I think I needed to pay more attention to what people feel, how the primary experience of the body is registered,

and the quite urgent and legitimate demand to have those aspects of sex recognized and supported. I did not mean to argue that gender is fluid and changeable (mine certainly is not). I only meant to say that we should all have greater freedoms to define and pursue our lives without pathologization, de-realization, harassment, threats of violence, violence, and criminalization. I join in the struggle to realize such a world.

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