

QUEER TOPICS IN THE DEBATES ABOUT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE: GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND – PERFORMANCE

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Gender performativity and gender performance are two terms that were introduced two decades ago within the feminist framework, although their respective origins are prior and unrelated to gender studies.

Firstly, performativity is a concept that arises in the context of philosophy of language. In Austin's 1962 book *How to do things with words*, performativity is used to define those speech acts which are capable of constituting what they apparently only state¹. The ability of those statements to generate reality made the term "performativity" an ideal concept to rethink the issue of identity within feminism, because it questions the alleged biological truth that the bodies would simply show and the language would just formulate.

Secondly, performance is a term with a longer history than that of the term performativity². It was firstly used in the nineteenth century to describe the result of a horse in a race or that of an athlete at a sporting event. In the twentieth century the term used to mean an experiment in the field of psychology or statistics. Furthermore, in the middle of the twentieth century, the term performance came to define very different types of representations in the scenic arts field. From this theatrical perspective there were two key moments in the development of the term performance: Alfred Jarry's play *King Ubu* in 1896, although the term performance was not still used in the context of scenic arts, and Yves Klein's performances in the 60s³. Finally, the term performance was to designate a cultural or theoretical category differing from its use as theatrical category that refers to the staging act⁴.

Performance, mainly through its relation to scenic arts, became a suitable concept to thematize the sex-gender-sexuality relation for different reasons: it focuses on the

¹ AUSTIN, John Langshaw, *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975 (1st edited in 1962).

² SOURIAU, Étienne, «Performance», in SOURIAU, Étienne (ed.), *Diccionario Akal De Estética*, Madrid, Akal, 1998, pp. 873-874.

³ See GOLDBERG, Roselee, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*. London, Thames & Hudson, 1979.

⁴ See SNOW, Peter, «Performing Society». *Thesis Eleven* vol. 103, no. 78 (2010), pp. 78-87.

physicality of the body beyond the narrative thread of the text, it gives autonomy to the interpretive act as such out of temporal local context, it breaks the classic model of linear narrative «introduction-climax-ending» in favor of a more segmented and heterogeneous perspective of the actions, and it explores the intersubjectivity of the staging act because it involves the public more strongly.

Connecting the different contexts of emergence of the terms performativity and performance to their etymological roots, it is rather challenging to outline how these two concepts are used in the field of gender studies and what their relation is with scientific knowledge. Both terms come from the verb "to perform", which means to do, to execute or to act and it happens that they sometimes overlap or are even used interchangeably⁵. This abundance of meanings and uses gives them a very wide potential as analysis categories of other phenomena but it also generates an instability that hinders the rigorous use of the terms and provokes the constant transmutation of their referents.

The inclusion of both terms in the field of gender studies is marked by the publication of Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990, a book where the so-called «theory of gender performativity» was developed and which marked a turning point in the argumentation about the sex-gender system and the political perspectives of feminist theory. Nevertheless it is important to point out that other authors such as Monique Wittig⁶, Teresa de Lauretis⁷, Gayle Rubin⁸, Foucault⁹ or Lacan¹⁰ already anticipated or analyzed the assumed theory of sex as unquestionable biological place, the mediation of sex through gender and the importance of sexual practices by questioning the prediscursive positioning of materiality.

In their context of appearance the main purpose of the concepts of gender performativity and gender performance was the internal criticism within the feminist

⁵ See SNOW, Peter, «Performing Society». *Thesis Eleven* vol. 103, no. 78 (2010), pp. 78-87; PARKER, Andrew/ KOSOFKY SEDGWICK, Eve, «Introduction: Performativity and Performance», in PARKER, Andrew/ KOSOFKY SEDGWICK, Eve (eds.), *Performativity and Performance*, New York and London, Routledge, 1995, pp. 1-18; LOXLEY, James, *Performativity. The New Critical Idiom*, New York, Routledge, 2007; ŞIRAY, Mehmet, *Performance and Performativity*, Frankfurt am Main, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2009.

⁶ WITTIG, Monique, *El Pensamiento Heterosexual*, Madrid, Egales, 2005 (1st edited in 1980).

⁷ DE LAURETIS, Teresa, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.

⁸ RUBIN, Gayle, «El tráfico de las mujeres. Notas sobre una economía política del sexo». *Revista Nueva Antropología*, vol. 8, no. 30 (1986), pp. 95-145.

⁹ FOUCAULT, Michel, *Historia De La Sexualidad*, 1. La Voluntad De Saber, Madrid, Siglo XXI, 1992.

¹⁰ MILLER, Jacques-Alain/ RABINOVICH, Dian, *El Seminario De Jacques Lacan. Libro 3. La Psicosis 1955-1956*, Buenos Aires-Barcelona-México, Paidós, 1981.

argumentation, although in an indirect way they were also criticizing the nature-based legitimacy of scientific knowledge. Both concepts put into question the stability of the category “woman”, whose biological prediscursive basis is set through scientific discourses which are operating from a standpoint of objectivity.

For example it must be considered that terms such as gender (Money 1947), feminism (Faneu de la Cour 1871), transsexualism (Hirschfeld 1931/ Clauldwell 1950/ Benjamin 1953) or homosexuality (Westphal 1869), which can be critical concepts against hegemonic discourses, actually emerged as pathological categories¹¹, which were later redefined in different political contexts. The development of gender political trends in twentieth century arises in a context closely linked to the production of medical discourses on the body, which had created specific typologies of bodies and fixed identities (for example the hysterical woman or the homosexual) and, at the same time, had presented the identities’ malleability (for example, the origin of the gender concept in Money’s studies about intersexual children).

From another point of view the problematic relationship between science and gender was already set out by authors like Sandra Harding¹² or Evelyn Fox Keller¹³, whose work revolves around two different questions of analysis.

- Firstly, the situation of women in science, which focuses on the asymmetric presence of women and men in this field.
- Secondly, the science question in feminism, which centres on a critical analysis of the epistemological assumptions and categories that are involved in the production of scientific knowledge. The main purpose of this second question would be the problem of objectivity: what is the connection between scientific knowledge and reality and what can feminism tell us about this connection?

The discourse analysis of these two questions helps us to situate the concepts of gender performativity and performance within the debates about science, technology and society for the following reasons.

Considering Harding’s second question, it is important to point out that science and gender studies find themselves facing the same epistemological problem: the type of relation between knowledge and reality and, for this reason, the position in the debates between realism/essentialism and constructivism.

¹¹ See DE LA HERMOSA, Marina (2012), “Apuntes para una genealogía crítica de la disforia” (conference). Workshop under the direction of Beatriz Preciado “Somateca. Formación en Prácticas Críticas”. MNCARS. [Unpublished Work.]

¹² HARDING, Sandra, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986.

¹³ FOX KELLER, Evelyn, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Yale, Yale University Press, 1985.

In the case of science, technology and society studies, Bruno Latour's *Pandora's Hope*¹⁴ is particularly relevant to describe the issue. According to Latour, the *adaequatio* between words and things is not the pillar of realism. On the contrary, *adaequatio* would be far away from the scientific reality from which knowledge is being produced. This means that in the production of scientific knowledge, while there is a continuity, i.e. the referentiality between scientific knowledge and reality, there is also a discontinuity because the referentiality between words (in this case, the results of the research in science) and things (the investigated reality) is not based on a correspondence, but rather made through a process of "transformation, transmutation and translation". Bringing material bodies to the paper would then be possible, but this scientific journey would bring them fragmented, translated and transformed¹⁵.

In the case of gender studies, the debate between reality and knowledge has been focused on the field of identities and, therefore, the strategies that a feminist politic should develop. Using the words of Gayle Rubin there is an «infinite variety» but also a «monotonous similarity» in the forms of thinking gendered oppression¹⁶. For example, there is a *de facto* oppression against women as social group, but in fact there is no such group of women in an orthodox way, because "woman" is not a given but a constructed category, which moreover intersects with many other constructed categories as migration, race, sexual orientation, etc.

The identity question can be better outlined if we consider the separation between the two questions asked by Harding: the question of women in science and the science question in feminism. Both questions address the topic of the relation between gender and science and are thus connected. Nevertheless they are different and not necessarily causally related. The gap between these two matters presupposes a distinction between the category «woman» and the political subject of feminist theory, a distinction that has produced an intense internal debate within equality and difference feminism and queer theory.

Gender performativity and performance are two relevant concepts in the argumentative framework for displacing the concept woman as political subject of feminism and could be

¹⁴ LATOUR, Bruno La Esperanza De Pandora. Ensayos Sobre La Realidad De Los Estudios De La Ciencia. Barcelona: Gedisa, 2001.

¹⁵ Here it would be interesting to analyze the differences and maybe incompatibilities between Butler's and Latour's perspectives about this transforming act of knowledge. Bruno Latour thinks that this transformation is possible because form and matter can be separated and form is what stays all throughout the process from reality to knowledge. On the other hand, form and matter appear as indivisible in Butler's work (see BUTLER, Judith, *Cuerpos que importan*. El límite discursivo del sexo, México, Paidós, 2002, pp. 53-94.).

¹⁶ RUBIN, Gayle, «El tráfico de las mujeres. Notas sobre una economía política del sexo». Revista Nueva Antropología, vol. 8, no. 30 (1986), pp. 95-145.

integrated in what Sandra Harding calls the «postmodernist scepticism about scientific reality».

What came first, sex or gender? For Butler this question is a sort of paradox because the fiction of sex as the cause of gender would be generated through the opposite construction – sex as the consequence from gender. The place of sex as a prediscursive category would then be the effect of the social construction of gender and not its root. Gender performativity would then state that the relationship between meaning (gender) and body (sex) is not mimetic, but productive and constitutive:

“Corollary: There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.”²⁷

“The body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified* as *prior*. This signification produces as an *effect* of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which *precedes* its own action.”²⁸

Nevertheless, understanding sex as an effect of gender does not mean to refuse the materiality of the body, which would be put into question but not strictly refused. It does not mean either some sort of gender voluntarism (that we could perform the representation of our bodies on our free will). These have been the two main criticisms levelled against gender performativity but these are not effective for the following reason. As Donna Haraway in her HIV-AIDS example expressed in her article «The promises of monsters»²⁹, it has not been said that HIV-AIDS does not exist, it is just being said that it does not exist in the form of an objective ontological truth understood as correspondence, as it has been introduced and divulged through scientific discourses. HIV, in the case of Donna Haraway, or gendered sex in the case of performativity theory, would not be “ghostly fantasies”, but rather “tricksters”.

Another important point is that gender performativity should be understood within the framework of a double theory of power as Allen proposes²⁰. Gender understood as performative analyses simultaneously gender like a domination system on bodies (based on the social pillars of gender binarism and heteronormativity) and the possibility of subverting this domination.

The possibility of subverting the domination form introduces the notion of gender performance within performativity discourse as a political category. The subversive gender

²⁷ BUTLER, Judith, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London, Routledge, 1999, p. 25.

²⁸ BUTLER, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 30.

²⁹ HARAWAY, Donna, «The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriated Others», in GROSSBERG, Lawrence/ NELSON, Cary/ TREICHLER, Paula A. (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, Nueva York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 295-337.

²⁰ See ALLEN, Amy, «Power Trouble: Performativity as Critical Theory», *Constellations*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1998), pp. 456-71.

performance would be a practice that manages to show the domination rule, because, whereas it is produced within the margins of the hegemonic discourses, it supposes an excess within the norm's framework. For example, a drag king performance would not just be a metaphorical or theatrical act, but rather a political act of the norm's resignification: not just a representation, but a construction. The parody would show the norm not as a legitimate reality but just as another performance, which is not imitated but transformed. Moreover, it says something about a society that we do not still have, because it imagines at the same time old but new embodiment structures, and thereon works towards the political subject of feminism, which in words of Teresa de Lauretis is not the allegorical subject «Woman», is not the concrete subjects «women», but is «a subject whose definition or conception is in progress»²¹.

If we just take into account these aspects, it can be said that the project of gender performativity and performance has a considerable analytical potential. Nevertheless, after an in-depth analysis of both terms as used in books from different authors, I also arrived to the conclusion that the conceptual situation and the political possibilities of both concepts are much more complex, diverse and confusing.

I have chosen three books which were published over a 20-year interval in order to show the meaning alterations in both terms in this period of time. The books considered and compared are: Butler's *Gender Trouble*²², Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*²³ and Preciado's *Testo Yonqui*²⁴. The results of the hermeneutical close reading and comparison of the three books are described in the following table.

²¹ DE LAURETIS, Teresa, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p.10.

²² BUTLER, Judith, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London, Routledge, 1999.

²³ HALBERSTAM, Judith, *Female Masculinity*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1998.

²⁴ PRECIADO, Beatriz, *Testo Yonqui*, Madrid, Espasa, 2008.

AUTHOR	PERFORMATIVITY	PERFORMANCE
Butler, Judith (1999) [1990]: <i>Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.</i> Performativity ≈ Performance)	Repetition and ritual (xv/ 43f.) Double theory of power: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutionalized act of domination and compulsion (147) Agency/ power as the condition of its own possibility/ iterability (xxiv) 	No definition, directly used. Two meanings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repeated action of gender (178) Performativity = performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subversive action of gender (186) Performativity = possibility condition of performance Performance = act that reveals gender performativity
Halberstam, Judith (2008) [1998]: <i>Female Masculinity.</i> Performativity = Performance)	Repeated, compulsory performance (126, 236) Possibility of gender roles (12) Construction is neither voluntarism, nor a manipulable artifice (119) Asymmetries of masculine and feminine performativity (234 f.) Nonperformativity (126)	Definition: spectacle, staging/ dramatization, theatricality, aesthetic presentation, harmonious blending, role (19, 215, 236) Different staging places: public spaces (bathrooms) and stage (drag king spectacle) (41, 240) Not every gender expression is a performance, gender is not fluid (transgender vs. transsexual) (173, 215)
Preciado (2008): <i>Testo Yonqui.</i> Performativity ≠ Performance)	Repetitive act in Butler's sense (58) Direct feature of science and technology: concept «technogender» (33, 84 ff.) Power of creating and not only of discovering, describing or representing (33)	Definition: social role, appearance, corporeal style, representation, public staging, staging, social and politically regulated repetition (96, 181) Gender is not a performance (89) Sexuality is a performance through pornography (181, 183, 210f.)

Firstly, one can see an evolution between the relation of the two terms, which appear in *Gender Trouble* as similar terms, in *Female masculinity* as synonymous and, on the contrary, in *Testo Yonqui* as clearly different to such an extent that the term performance has been thrown away from a theory of gender performativity.

Secondly, considering gender performance and performativity separately, the two terms have a wide variety of meanings in these authors' works.

In the case of gender performativity, I consider that this variety among the uses of the term by each author is an extension and correction of its uses. Butler focuses on it as a double theory of power. Halberstam introduces two new notions, which shape more precisely the concept of gender performativity, namely its asymmetry and the concept of nonperformativity. In the case of Preciado's *Testo Yonqui*, performativity begins to be just an indirect feature of gender, but a direct feature of science and technology. Gender is

performative so long as it has turned into a technogender and cannot be thought any longer as a purely biological object, for example, through the pill, dildos or prosthesis²⁵.

Maybe this last approach is the most interesting in order to relate scientific knowledge with the terms of performance and performativity, because the connection between the three terms seems clearer. Moreover, this last discourse between performativity and technogender has produced the rejection of the term performance to approach the relation between science and a non-mimetic notion of gender. Preciado denies that gender is a performance, because it does not have a theatrical but a scientific and technological legitimization. This theatrical basis which, on the contrary, brings Halberstam and Butler to associate the concept of performativity to the one of performance, is what brings Preciado to deny this association. But beyond this crucial difference among the three texts, their approaches have in common that they associate performance to theater in a quite loose manner.

Butler gives no definition of the term performance or how she is using it from the perspective of scenic arts. Halberstam and Preciado do not give neither an explicit definition of the term, but at least we can find some tracks along the text that allow us to understand what they mean with this word: show, staging act, theatricality, esthetic representation, character, social role, body style, etc.

The absence of a strong theoretical commitment of gender performance with the scenic arts has created empty references²⁶, which make difficult the internal coherence of the relation of gender performativity and performance and the rigor of the approach. Are they meaning with performance a representation or a presentation²⁷? Are they meaning with character the actor's role or a scenic person? Is the public co-maker of the meaning of a gender performance²⁸?

Finally, there is not only heterogeneity in the gender performativity and performance definitions, but also in their application objects: sometimes they are applied to gender understood as the general construction of gender system²⁹, other times they are applied to the different aspects of gender-system: gender, sex or sexuality. Moreover, if we consider

²⁵ See also PRECIADO, Beatriz, *Manifiesto contre-sexuel*, París, Baland, 2000.

²⁶ As examples of the problem of empty references of the term gender performance see EIERMANN, André, *Postspektakuläres Theater. Die Alterität der Aufführung und die Entgrenzung der Künste*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2009, p. 59; REINELT, Janelle G./ ROACH, Joseph R., *Critical Theory and Performance*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2007, p. 312.

²⁷ To point out the distinction between the terms of presentation and representation see SUÁREZ ÁLVAREZ, Jorge Iván, *Realidad virtual. Escenografía y transformación. Nuevas concepciones del espacio escénico en el teatro actual*, Madrid, BUCM, 2006, pp. 148ff.

²⁸ RANCIÈRE, Jacques, *Le spectateur émancipé*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2008.

²⁹ JAGOSE, Annamarie, *Queer. Theory. Eine Einführung*, Berlin, Querverlag, 2001, p.11.

gender as a complex production of social life with different levels like symbolism, structure of social life and individual gender as Harding exposes³⁰, it becomes very difficult to delineate the application field of performativity and performance, and both terms run the risk of turning into umbrella concepts or, even more, empty names that just refer to the possibility of creating something new or to bodies' malleability in general.

With these different critics to both concepts, could gender performativity and performance still be found useful to approach questions related to scientific knowledge? I do think that they are still operative terms that can help to analyze the production of science and its consequences in the configuration of subjectivity.

Firstly, the different ways of understanding gender performativity and performance within queer discourses reveals us a new place of techno-scientific discourses within feminism: the possibility of thinking biomedical discourses and technology advances on the body not only as ideological enemy that pathologizes certain identities, but as an argumentative ally that reveals the constructive possibilities of materiality. As the term techno-gender shows, science reconfigures completely the notions of nature and society towards a more hybrid conception of knowledge and embodiment.

Secondly, gender performativity manages to change the meaning and political repercussion of the cases that were understood through scientific hegemonic discourses as marginal. Queer theory, in its wide and heterogeneous spectrum, brings on the table the question about gender limits. The dualist taxonomy woman-man is read critically through a transgender perspective, that of the people «who do not conform to prevailing expectations about gender by presenting genders that were not assigned to them at birth or by presenting and living genders in ways that may not be readily intelligible in terms of more traditional conceptions of gender»³¹. This means a relevant change of perspective because the cases which were considered before as exception are now understood as key cases to delimit the framework where gender legitimating discourses are being produced and to expand the strategies of a feminist theory³².

Finally, performance can also stay as a useful term, although it needs to be refined with a closer work between gender, science and scenic arts studies. For example, the analysis of the

³⁰ HARDING, Sandra, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986, p.11.

³¹ BETTCHER, Talia, (26/09/2009) «Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues», in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-trans/>, [Accessed: 11/05/2011].

³² See BUTLER, Judith, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London, Routledge, 1999, pp. 27-28; HALBERSTAM, Judith, *Female Masculinity*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1998, p.182; DESPENTES, Virginie, *Teoría King Kong*, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Melusina, 2007, pp. 93-94; PRECIADO, Beatriz, *Testo Yonqui*, Madrid, Espasa, 2008, p. 235.

divulgarion of scientific results as public performances which have been acted out as «instantiations of political power» or thinking science «as a result of doing with bodily engagements rather than writing»³³. Performance has a privileged place between fact and fiction, which can be very useful for feminist critical theory, as the subject of feminism moves constantly between the historical representations of gender and the imagination of a subject and a society that are constantly being constructed.

³³ RHYS MORUS, Iwan, «Placing Performance», in *Isis*, vol.101, no. 4, December 2010, pp.775-778.