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Reconsideration of the Performative Effects of Assembly Discussed by Judith Butler from Three Perspectives

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed global demonstrations and social movements against discrimination, inequality, and genocide, such as Black Lives Matter and Free Palestine. These movements gather diverse people from different circumstances to challenge discrimination and inequality. Judith Butler has emphasized the significance of these resistance modes, critiquing identity politics for their tendency to restrict political claims to a unified foundation and essentialize the identity. Instead, Butler advocates solidarity that preserves diversity, enabling individuals from disparate positions to work together in collective forms while maintaining their differences. In this context, Butler posits that performative resistance takes effect in assemblies formed when multiple individuals convene in "public spaces", such as squares and streets. In other words, when individuals from diverse backgrounds assemble, there are performative oppositions to the status quo of discrimination and inequality. This paper examines and organizes the performative effects of assemblies from three perspectives, showing their potential to reduce discrimination and inequality.

Introduction

In recent years, global demonstrations and social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Free Palestine have mobilized diverse people to contest systemic discrimination, inequality, and genocide. Judith Butler has long analyzed these modes of resistance, beginning with their seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler critiques identity politics for essentializing identity by using it as the foundation for political claims and movements, arguing that this approach imposes a restrictive framework based on shared qualities. In particular, Butler (1990) critiqued the essentialist feminist movement for uniting under the monolithic category of "women", which excludes differences among women. Through the lens of Gender Performativity, Butler reconceptualized identity as performative, constructed through repeated social and cultural acts rather than being fixed or natural. This theory underscores the limitations of identity-based solidarity and introduces an alternative form of resistance that remains multiplicity and differences.

Butler (2015) developed the concept of solidarity, which brings together diverse individuals through the performative effects of assembly. As Butler described them, assemblies are physical gatherings where people from different positions come together across identities. When people gather in "public spaces", such as squares and streets, they exercise performative effects that challenge inequality through the very act of gathering (Butler, 2015). The performative effects of assembly emphasize the profound impacts of collective action, particularly by oppressed people. However, these effects are analyzed through various lenses, including precarity, bodily performativity, and horizontality. Accordingly, this paper

reexamines the performative effects of assembly through these three perspectives to elucidate how it works in opposing inequality.

To explore this, this paper is structured into two sections. The first section reviews Butler's theory of gender performativity as introduced in *Gender Trouble*. The second section examines the three primary performative effects of assembly, as reconsidered through Butler's analysis. From this consideration, I argue that assembly, by bringing together individuals across diverse contexts, can serve as an effective resistance mode to combat discrimination and inequality.

1. Butler's Key Concept, Gender Performativity

The theory of gender performativity, introduced in *Gender Trouble* (1990), critiqued the essentialist feminist movement. However, Butler did not aim to dissolve feminist activism but rather advocated for alternative modes that avoid unifying women under a singular identity.

1.1. Butler's Critique of Identity Politics

Butler argued that grounding political claims and the feminist movement on the fixed identity of "women" presupposes "a generally shared conception of 'women'"(Butler, 1990, p. 7). Treating identity as a static category marginalizes those who do not conform to predefined standards, excluding diverse women from the category of "women." At the time, feminist discourse had already recognized that "gender intersects with racial, class, ethics, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler, 1990, p. 6). Butler critiqued the insistence on the coherence and unity of the category of "women", asserting that it "has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (Butler, 1990, pp. 19–20). In this framework, presuming a unified gender identity hinders solidarity by excluding women from different cultural and social contexts. Butler critiqued the concept of "unity" within solidarity and asked:

> Does "unity" set up an exclusionary norm of solidarity at the level of identity that rules out the possibility of a set of actions which disrupt the very borders of identity concepts, or which seek to accomplish precisely that disruption as an explicit political aim? (Butler, 1990, p. 21).

This rhetorical question highlights Butler's concern that unity, as a normative principle, establishes rigid boundaries and excludes those who fail to conform. Solidarity based on "unity" therefore draws clear boundaries between inside and outside solidarity. Those who cannot be unified are excluded. Furthermore, demanding consistency in identity for unity fixes the identity on which solidarity is based and reinforces its normativity. In these respects, Butler harshly critiqued identity politics.

Butler also argued that when essentialist feminism aims for solidarity under the category of "women," gender identity is treated as an expression or derivation of "natural" sex (Butler, 1999). The term "gender" was originally introduced to distinguish it from "biological" sex by defining gender as culturally constructed (Buter, 1990, p. 9). In this view, gender should be considered culturally and socially

independent of sex, which is based on biological factors. Sex and gender are disconnected in this respect, and the sexed body can be seen as open to the possibility of acquiring cultural meaning through various genders, regardless of the body's biological sex (Butler, 1990, p. 10). However, gender was often constructed under the expectation that "it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed" (Butler, 1999, p. xiv). In this respect, gender was considered "a natural manifestation of sex" (Butler, 1999, p. xx). This view misconstrues gender, which should be recognized as a cultural construct, as an inherent essence, thereby naturalizing it. Butler criticized this notion and sought to "denaturalize" gender (Butler, 1999, p. xx), using the theory of performativity to demonstrate how gender is culturally constructed.

1.2. Theory of Gender Performativity

Butler criticized the perspective that treated gender as an expression of an interior essence, arguing instead that gender is performative. The concept of performativity originated in the speech act theory proposed by J.L. Austin, a philosopher of language. Austin identified distinctions in language acts: "the locutionary act," which refers to "things we do in saying something" (Austin, 1962, p. 108); "the illocutionary act which has a certain *force* in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is *the achieving of* certain *effects* by saying something" (Austin, 1962, p. 120). For example, when a judge makes a defendant guilty in court, the speech act performatively renders the defendant guilty. Butler (1990) expanded upon the concept of performativity in speech acts, arguing that gender is constructed performatively as it is spoken: "In this sense, gender is always a doing" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). Butler further clarified this view, stating:

> The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body (Butler, 1999, p. xv).

Gender is produced through discourse and a series of acts influenced by gender norms. Thus, gender is not derived from any natural or intrinsic basis. Butler emphasized this point: "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" (Butler,1990, p. 33). In other words, gender is neither derived from an inner essence nor an expression of a foundational identity. Rather, identity is constructed in the very act of its manifestation.

How, then, is identity naturalized and fixed? Butler argued that "the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*" (Butler, 1990, p. 178). Through the repetition of gendered discourses and acts, traditional gender and gender norms are reproduced performatively. These repetitions, occurring daily and over time, give the impression of a fixed identity. However, Butler noted that because gender is constructed through repeated performance, it remains open to reinterpretation and disruption. Butler suggested that unconventional forms of repetition can fluidize and challenge established gender norms.

> The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which,

in their occasional *dis*continuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this "ground" (Butler, 1990, p. 179).

Gender and identity, are often considered foundational for specific claims, actions, or self-conceptions. However, identities, while seemingly substantive and fixed, are performatively constructed through repeated acts. Through these repetitions, identity is idealized and normatively produced as performative. However, such acts are not always replicated in the same manner; variations in repetition reveal the possibility of disruption. These inconsistencies between gender norms and actions underscore the fact that gender lacks a fixed, inherent basis.

In summary, the theory of gender performativity challenges the notion of fixed gender and identity. It also critiques identity politics for its inability to examine the discourses and practices constructing identity or to recognize their potential for change. In this framework, gender, constructed through the repetition of gendered acts, is neither a naturalized interior essence nor an expression of a foundational identity. Essentialist feminism, grounded in its solidarity with fixed gender categories, inadvertently reinforced the perception of gender as immutable.

However, this does not imply that Butler dismissed the feasibility of feminist solidarity. On the contrary, Butler argued that "Perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact" (Butler, 1990, p. 20). Butler criticized solidarity that seeks "unity," as it often results in exclusion and division by attempting to resolve inherent contradictions. Instead, Butler proposed solidarity not based on identity but on "an emerging and unpredictable assemblage of positions" (Butler, 1990, p. 20) or an "open coalition*"* (Butler, 1990, p. 22). Such solidarity accommodates contradictions and gathers individuals from diverse positions, enabling political demands and objections. Butler further expanded on this idea by exploring the performative effects of assembly focusing on the performativity of bodily acts in resistance (Butler, 2015).

2. The Performative Effects of Assembly

When *Gender Trouble* was published, the pressing need was to find ways to resist discrimination against women without falling into the trap of identity politics or diminishing the power of resistance. Butler emphasized that identity is performatively constructed and thus susceptible to disturbance. Butler criticized identity-based solidarity, advocating instead for a form of solidarity that gathers people from diverse perspectives while maintaining their differences. This concept evolved into Butler's exploration of the performative effects of assembly, particularly the resistant impact of bodies gathering in "public spaces", such as squares and streets (Butler, 2015).

2.1. Body Performativity

In arguing that gender is performatively constructed, Butler emphasized that this construction arises as much from action as from discourse. Butler extended J.L. Austin's concept of linguistic performativity to include bodily performativity. Butler asserted, "to say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment" (Butler, 2015, p. 32). In other words, gender is not only established

through discourse, such as being named or categorized, but also through gestures, behavior, desires, and actions that align with socially recognized gender norms. These norms are reenacted, often unconsciously, by individuals and their communities (Butler, 2015, pp. 30–31). Through such repeated performances, gender and its associated norms are constructed and maintained. In Butler's theory of gender performativity, it can be posited that bodily acts are considered to initiate further acts to be performed, to give rise to something, or to produce some effects. In addition, Butler examined bodily performativity and suggested that the very act of assembling in "public spaces" has the performative effects of resistance.

Butler considered people who congregate in squares and streets to challenge the prevailing order through the lens of the concept of precarity. Precarity refers to the "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, 2015, p. 33). Those subjected to precarity include women, racial minorities, the economically disadvantaged, and the stateless. Recognizing the diversity of individuals exposed to precarity, Butler argued that broad-based solidarity among people in this condition offers a powerful means to challenge discrimination and inequality.

When individuals under the precarity gather in public spaces, they challenge the discriminatory structures that marginalize them. Butler argued that such gatherings do not require unified political demands to be effective. Instead, the act of assembling itself communicates resistance, even before any explicit discursive claims are made. In this sense, gatherings in "public spaces" such as squares and streets become performative acts of resistance under their very occurrence (Butler, 2015).

2.2. Three Main Performative Effects of the Assembly[1]

What kinds of performative effects of contestation can be generated by assemblies formed when several people gather in squares or on the streets? This section organizes these effects into three perspectives.

The first effect is that when people exposed to precarity have assembled, their bodies become visible. At the same time, this visibility performatively produces resistance effects against precarity. People facing precarity are marginalized and deprived of institutional protection and redress. Consequently, when such individuals gather in squares and streets, their exposure to precarity becomes visible. In this respect, Butler argues that the mere act of assembling communicates its condition before any discursive claims or demands are made (Butler, 2015, p. 25). Thus, the assembly itself, composed of individuals exposed to precarity, performatively challenges precarity by making their condition visible. Even when participants raise differing arguments, their collective presence underscores the

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[1] Solidarity and the right to appear by people exposed to precarity was one of the subjects of an oral presentation at the 2024 Congress of the Kansai Society for Ethics (2024/11/09).

urgency of addressing precarity. This form of solidarity enables individuals from diverse positions to collaborate without relying on a shared identity or unified claim. Butler points out performative resistance in this solidarity, emphasizing that it arises from the intersection of differences and overlapping political goals among those exposed to precarity.

The second effect is that assemblies can performatively generate and exercise previously unapproved rights in the immediate context of the act. This concept can be better understood through a concrete example. Consider undocumented individuals assembling to advocate for residence permits[2]. These individuals, lacking legal rights to make political statements, nonetheless form assemblies in "public spaces". According to Butler, these assemblies are not invalid; rather, they exemplify the performative exercise of unapproved rights, particularly the right to appear (Butler, 2015, p. 11).

Butler's concept of the right to appear draws on Hannah Arendt's analysis of the political/public sphere.[3] According to Butler, Arendt posits that the political realm is not confined to physical locations but emerges by the appearance of one other against another. Expanding on this, Butler defines the right to appear as the right to appear in relation to others. Butler argued that when individuals exposed to precarity assemble, they exercise the right to appear performatively (Butler, 2015, pp. 24–25). This perspective challenges the notion that individuals lacking codified legal rights are incapable of assembling, making political demands, or raising objections. Instead, it demonstrates that people exposed to precarity can effectively resist the status quo within their circumstances.

According to Butler, the act of plural bodies assembling in squares or on streets carries performative effects of contestation. These gatherings convey political demands, even before articulating them discursively through declarations or formal claims. Such solidarity does not require a uniform purpose and can gather diverse individuals facing precarity. Butler explains:

> No one is ever asked to produce an identity card before gaining access to such a demonstration. If you appear as a body on the street, you help to make the claim that emerges from that plural set of bodies, amassing and persisting there (Butler, 2015, p. 58).

This statement underscores that individuals assembling in "public spaces" need neither prove a specific identity nor possess codified rights to engage in such acts. Butler emphasized that assemblies formed without recognized legal rights remain valid and the right to appear is performatively exercised in the very action.

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[2] Butler (2015) analyzed the demonstrations held by undocumented workers in Los Angeles in 2006. At this demonstration, undocumented Mexican workers assembled and sang the American anthem in Spanish. Butler argued that "they laid claim to that right in and by the vocalization itself" (Butler, 2015, p. 49).
[3] Butler referred here to Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

Third, the assembly of diverse individuals exposed to precarity can embody, in performative manners, horizontal relations and equitable situations among people. Such solidarity demonstrates, through its very act, the possibility of individuals working together across multiple identities precisely by assembling. In other words, it embodies transversality, enabling people from varied backgrounds who might not initially perceive commonalities to assemble and act collectively, thus linking people equally with their differences.

This phenomenon is exemplified in Butler's (2015) analysis of the revolutionary demonstrations in Tahrir Square during the 2011 Egyptian revolution of the Arab Spring. In Tahrir Square, demonstrators gathered continuously, engaging in the essential tasks required to sustain life, such as eating, cleaning, and acquiring places to rest. According to Butler, these tasks were often shared among participants or performed in shifts, which disrupted traditional gendered divisions of labor (Butler, 2015, p. 89). Butler notes that in these instances, "what some would call 'horizontal relations' among the protestors formed easily and methodically" (Butler, 2015, p. 89).[4]

In this context, the solidarity of individuals who demand equality can be said to performatively embody equality in their solidarity. The gathering of people from diverse positions and under the precarity performatively manifests horizontality and equality as they demand such details, but it also communicates that this equality is not only achievable but also essential in the way it materializes through their actions. Thus, the assembly has the performative effect of communicating that equality is both possible and necessary in its embodied form.

Conclusion

This paper has organized and presented Butler's arguments regarding the performative effects of assemblies composed of multiple bodies gathered in " public spaces" such as squares and streets, examining these effects from three perspectives. It began by introducing Butler's foundational concept of gender performativity.
Butler critiqued the perception of gender as an expression of interior essence, emphasizing that gender is culturally constructed by discursive practices and repeated actions. Through this lens, Butler pointed out the potential for these repeated acts to deviate from convention, destabilizing traditional gender identities. This perspective challenges the notion of identity as fixed or natural and critiques identity politics that rely on static identities as the basis for political actions. Instead, Butler advocated for solidarity that does not seek unity but rather enables diverse individuals to resist collectively, focusing on bodily performativity.

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[4] In these revolutionary movements, the gathering of women in Tahrir Square had the aspect of facilitating the subsequent appearance of women in the public sphere, and although Butler here emphasizes the positive aspect of the resistance effect of the gathering of women, in reality, it is necessary to bear in mind the fact that the women were more exposed to violence and sexual victimization occurred. (e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2011; Razek, 2012).

Butler stated that when diverse individuals gather in "public spaces" such as squares and streets, their gatherings can generate resistance through three performative effects. While these effects are various, they can be organized as follows: (1) The assembly marks visible the precarity and risk faced by those gathered, performatively opposing precarity. (2) Rights, often unrecognized before the act of assembly, are exercised in the immediate moment of coming together. (3) The solidarity formed among diverse individuals exposed to precarity performatively embodies horizontal and egalitarian relations.

Butler's exploration of the performative effects of such assemblies is significant as it emphasizes the potential of collective resistance among those marginalized and exposed to oppression. By highlighting the constructive impacts of such movements, this perspective repudiates the notion of invalidating the efforts of marginalized groups exposed to precarity. Instead, it promotes the realization of equality and the elimination of discrimination in contemporary society.

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