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Performativity as a Symptom

The Trembling Body in the Works of Butler

FEW GENDER THEORISTS have generated more emotion, interpretation, and discussion than Judith Butler. The field of Butler expertise is vast and growing, and stakeholders of different interpretations of her work are often engaged in affective debate over how to understand her arguments and put them to use. Is there anything left to say about the key concepts, performativity, melancholia, or even understandings of gender and their significance for feminist and other political projects? In this essay I want to return to the concept of heterosexual melancholy as defined by Butler (1990; 1993; 1997) in order to discuss its central significance for Butler's understanding of gender. I do so because I believe that, in contrast to the concept of performativity, heterosexual melancholy provides gender with an ontology. Through a modest rereading and reinterpretation of Butler, motivated primarily by a certain frustration with the way she has been read in parts of Scandinavian gender studies, a reading which tends to render her a social constructivist and often ignores the centrality of psychoanalytic ideas to her overall arguments, I want to propose that while gender is reproduced and manifested through performativity, performativity does not in itself constitute gender. Instead, I contend, gender is constituted by the heterosexual melancholy; it is through this melancholy that the incorporation of gender and gendered sexuality takes place and the almost *manic* repetition of gender that Butler calls performativity is in that sense not the origin,

but rather a symptom, of this melancholy. In order to illuminate this, perhaps seemingly minor point, I will exemplify with some feminist interpretations of the performativity of gender, which as I will show differ from my own reading. I do so not to insist on correct readings but rather in the interest of furthering discussions about gender within Nordic feminist discussions. To that end and in closing the article, I will briefly discuss the possible effects a focus on the symptom rather than its cause might have, and have had, on some strands of feminist theory and recent feminist politics in relation to late modern identity formation and political mobilization.

Performativity and Subversion

There is a tendency, especially among some Scandinavian gender scholars, to understand performativity above all through its subversive potential to question heteronormative understandings of gender (see also Edenheim 2008). While of course there have been objections to and critiques of an overly optimistic promise attached to the concept of performativity, it seems that performativity is understood as a kind of doing which can radically change our relation to gender. Even though Butler has revised her own use of the concept over time, already in the very first introduction of the concept, performativity is above all defined as a means to exclude the acknowledgment of a split subject and the shattered and incomprehensible matter that our bodies consist of. Performativity, I would thus argue, was not introduced as a concept explaining only change or possible subversion:

In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires *create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core*, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. If the “cause” of desire, gesture, and act can be localized within the “self” of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view. (Butler 1990, 136, my emphasis)

In *Gender Trouble*, performativity is thus (quite briefly) introduced to describe an act that forecloses the fact that there is neither coherent matter nor coherent language that can help us make sense of ourselves and our world. Performativity can here be seen as that which is always necessary in order to maintain a subject's phantasmatic sense of a stable body with an inner core. Since Butler focuses on the human body, her take on this "sense of matter" is that gendered performativities have become the hegemonic way of "making sense" of bodily differences for all, but *not* as a heterosexual original copied by homosexuals:

[S]o-called originals, men and women within the heterosexual frame, are similarly constructed [as butch and femme], performatively established. [...] Through performativity, dominant and nondominant gender norms are equalized. But some of those performative accomplishments claim the place of nature or claim the place of symbolic necessity, and they do this only by occluding the ways in which they are performatively established. (Butler 2004, 209)

To answer the question why we all do this, Butler (1990, 57–65; 1993, 223–42; 1997, 132–50) provides us with a revised feminist psychoanalytical explanation of incorporated melancholia, to which I will return below. Explaining performativity using psychoanalytic theory, and especially pointing out the relationship between *identification* and *desire*, Butler (see e.g., 2004, 131–51) opens up for the possibility of *other* identifications and desires, or perhaps rather, other recognitions and interrelations between differently gendered sexualities. At the same time, she repeatedly cautions us to see e.g., drag-performance as an inherently subverting performativity. The word she uses to describe what drag "does" is *allegorizes* (Butler 1993, 235–7):

[A]s an allegory that works through the hyperbolic, drag brings into relief what is, after all, determined only in relation to the hyperbolic: the understated, taken-for-granted quality of heterosexual performativity. At its best, then, drag can be read for the way in which hyperbolic

norms are dissimulated as the heterosexual mundane. At the same time these same norms, taken not as commands to be obeyed, but as imperatives to be “cited,” twisted, queered, brought into relief as heterosexual imperatives, are not, for that reason, necessarily subverted in the process. (Butler 1993, 237)

Subversion, it turns out, is not even the aim; rather Butler has set out to identify the fine line between that which, in perhaps more crude and Nietzschean terms, can be named *reactive resentment* in relation to *critical action*:

The goal of this analysis, then, cannot be pure subversion, as if an undermining were enough to establish and direct political struggle. Rather than denaturalization or proliferation, it seems that the question for thinking discourse and power in terms of the future has several paths to follow: how to think power as resignification together with power as the convergence or interarticulation of relations of regulation, domination, constitution? How to know what might qualify as an affirmative resignification – with all the weight and difficulty of that labor – and how to run the risk of reinstalling the abject at the site of its opposition? But how, also, to rethink the terms that establish and sustain bodied that matter? (Butler 1993, 240, my emphasis)

In the chapter “The Question of Social Transformation” in *Undoing Gender* (2004) she is even less confident in the subversive abilities of resignification and more influenced by radical democratic critique of liberal identity politics:

Which action is right to pursue, which innovation has a value, and which does not? The norms that we would consult to answer this question cannot themselves be derived from resignification. They have to be derived from a radical democratic theory and practice; thus, resignification has to be contextualized in this way. (Butler 2004, 224)

As I see it, Butler becomes more wary over time of the risks of resistance as politics (“a philosophy of critique”), though she always keeps the door open for the need to resist in matters of life and death (“a philosophy of freedom”). This endorses, I believe, a reading of performativity as having possible (but never automatic) resignifying effects, but also of performativity as an always necessary part of any subjectification. In short, performativity may be seen as a psychic necessity to foreclose the perceived threat of incoherencies and dependencies by causing a psychosomatic “illusion” of a coherent and autonomous body. In that case, foreclosing the impossibility of a coherent body is still an act of foreclosure even if the act or gesture performed is not normatively gendered. Hence, drag or transgender performativities will not in themselves or automatically rid us of the illusion of the need of a coherent body; performativity can, at its best, be used only to show *another* version of gender as liveable, but only by using the *same* illusion of a coherent body that is already a requirement for late modern subjectivities. To make other versions of gender liveable is, of course, important in itself for feminist projects that seek to call attention to how life beyond a gender binary can seem unliveable and that aim for humanization. Certainly, to grant otherwise unrecognized bodies the illusion of a differently, or non-normatively, gendered core through recognizable and citable performativities can in some cases be vital, but it does not challenge the culturally and psychically felt need of performing a coherent “core” itself – a need that, as I will try to demonstrate below, may, ironically, not have much to do with gender. Gendered performativities are in that sense a symptom of something else *that is not gender* but that we, phantasmatically, really *want* to be gender, no matter what. So, performativity in itself, then, may be defined as a symptom that we seem to be unable to live without. But what is it a symptom *of*?

Before trying to answer this question, I want to compare this perhaps uncommon reading of performativity with a more frequent one to show why the distinctions I try to identify are important and what may happen if they are not made visible. In this case, the definition of perfor-

mativity below, drawn from Tiina Rosenberg, professor of theatre and gender studies in Stockholm, is to my mind a representative example of a common interpretation of Butler's take on performativity:

Significant for the concept performativity is the accentuation of active efficacious processes [*aktivt verksamma processer*]. Emphasis is not on completed, finished, or fixated results, but on *social practises as actively creating sex/gender, sexualities, ethnicities, and other deciding social categories*. This approach is significant for so called social constructivism, which assumes, as implied in its name, that the social world is constructed. (Rosenberg 2005, 14, my translation and emphasis)

In her earlier work, Butler has developed theories on gender-performativity. A reappearing thought in her gender theory is that gender identities are installed through a stylized repetition of acts. Their *social* stability is dependent on this repetition, while it at the same time implies a possible change. (Rosenberg 2006, 11, my translation and emphasis)

The point here is not to set up Rosenberg as a straw-woman for the argument at hand, but rather to use her as an example of what I see as a particular kind of reading of Butler as a social constructivist.¹ In Rosenberg, the idea of performativity as the accentuation of active or efficacious processes, in turn then explained as social practices actively creating gender is stressed, and emphasis is on achieving a social stability, not psychic or psychosomatic. Already existing social categories (in this case many more than “just” “sex/gender”) is the reason presented for this need of self-regulation, a sort of structural demand put on the individual to adapt, rather than defining these social categories as (always failed) resolutions, to another, more existential dilemma or crisis.² In Rosenberg's (2005, 16) take on performativity, there is also an accentuation of the possibility for “sex/gender identities to consciously and unconsciously be played out ‘correct’ or ‘wrong,’” where a possibility of consciously acting subversive is expected to be a queer feminist political strategy for change.³

Even though Rosenberg does point out Butler's use of the Nietzschean "there is no doer behind the deed," in her interpretation of Butler's notion of performativity it seems as if there is an assumed coherent psyche with a coherent body that precedes the deed and somehow chooses to act in one way or another. This psyche can choose to be in "coherence" with its body (straight performativity) or in "incoherence" with its body (queer/parodic performativity), but it is still, it seems to me, a body that is *acknowledged* by the psyche that does the acting. This psyche is not in crisis, and runs no risk of losing (its illusion of) a core. Rather it chooses, in accordance with a pre-given desire or rationality, to be what it wants to be.⁴ In my reading of Butler's work, however, there is no place for such liberal subjectivities. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler (1997, 92) writes: "The body is not a site on which a construction takes place, it is a destruction on the occasion of which a subject is formed." This implies (among many things), that the psyche simply cannot acknowledge the body as such ("the part of the body which is not preserved in sublimation"; "the bodily remainder," Butler, 1997, 92). Performativity is in that sense an unconscious regulation to avoid psychic chaos (psychosis); a simultaneous attempt at producing an inner core and disavow the body and its material incomprehensibility and limits (including its finitude).

Why then, is this difference between my reading and Rosenberg's reading important? Theoretically, because my attempt recognizes Butler as not only influenced by psychoanalytical theory, but also the influences she takes up later on from the sexual difference school (to which I will soon return). And politically because the accentuation of the possibility of subversion through resignification made by queer scholars like Rosenberg, I would say, runs the risk of fetishizing (all and any) resignification and hence also the identity positions usually following such resignifications. Such an approach, also produces a feminist and queer politics where the actual function of gendered performativity is blocked, or foreclosed, and this also runs the risk of blocking the possibility of a political space for critical action based on a desire for solidarity rather than on a desire for differentiated identities.

The Fear of the Same as Another (Possible) Difference

To be able to bring forward critical questions relating to the ontology of gender and what we can and cannot do with that ontology, questions usually avoided or sidestepped by the perpetuated “happy performative” of the liberal queer theorist – that is, a queer theorist who too hastily insists on performativity, understood as a conscious or voluntary act, as the route to gender liberation – I think it necessary to avoid the “blocked” version of performativity. The key to Butler’s definition of gender, I would argue, lies in her critique and revision of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, which becomes more evident over time (1993 onwards). Reading Butler as “just” claiming that “gender is performative” and neglecting her revision of psychoanalytical theories on gender, as the tendency has been among a range of Scandinavian scholars and students, has, in my view, had an unfortunate impact on the theoretical debates within feminism in the Nordic setting, where we have opened up for a trivializing critique of “Butler’s social constructivism” instead of an engagement with the philosophical context in which her work inscribes itself.

“Gender is performative” is not only a sentence found in numerous student papers, but also in articles of gender scholars all over the world. We might speculate that this is an effort to condense the notion performativity as a concept that explains gender both epistemologically and ontologically into one statement. However, even though emphasis is on gender as something we *do* rather than *are*, the question *why* we do gender, and not something else, is not satisfactorily captured by “gender is performative.” Surely, societal norms are one reason, acknowledged and analysed by Butler and others, but why gender? Why not something else? What is it that the social norms, pointing us toward gender, “help” us foreclose? The heterosexual matrix also points us away from same-sex desire, but homosexual and bisexual desires are also already gendered. Butler is clear on this point: we are all gendered, because our desire in this (psychoanalytic) model is gendered (straight or gay, cis or trans), we just enjoy our genders differently. But why is desire so closely linked to gender? This is where I believe it is possible to start to discern

an ontology of gender in Butler's texts, which lies within the concept of *melancholy*.

In the chapter "Phantasmatic Identification" in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler explicitly challenges both biologist and constructivist notions of gender by turning to feminist revisions of the Lacanian concept "sexuation." She starts discreetly:

What has been understood as the performativity of gender – far from the exercise of an unconstrained voluntarism – will prove to be impossible apart from notions of such political constraints registered psychically.
(Butler 1993, 94)

Then she continues to reintroduce Lacan's sexuation scheme (already discussed in the previous chapter "The Lesbian Phallus") and presents her own aim:

The point of this analysis is not to affirm the constraints under which sexed positions are assumed, but to ask *how the fixity of such constraints is established*, what sexual (im)possibilities have served as the constitutive constraints of sexed positionality, and what possibilities of reworking those constraints arise from within its own terms. (Butler 1993, 96, my emphasis)

The conclusion reached is that the oedipal temporality of going from castration anxiety/penis envy, i.e., the sexed position (*identification*), to desiring the opposite sex (*desire*), makes a too clean cut between identification and desire, where the question of why anyone desires to be sexed is still unresolved. There is something else taking place "before" the boy can identify as a boy, and "before" the girl can identify as a girl: the creation of a need to be that which you are not allowed to desire. If a boy cannot be a girl, the option is to *have* her instead and it is in this very *having* that his identity as a boy/man will grow: identification and desire hence becomes inseparable from each other. A girl also constitutes her gendered identification through the same prohibition of desiring that

which she is supposed to be (woman). Hence, Butler has identified a prohibited same-sex desire as preceding the gendered identification. But it is a prohibition of a kind of “non-gendered” same-sex desire? What kind of desire is that? And from what fear or prohibition does it emanate?

I think it is essential to *not* read this same-sex desire as gendered. Even though the pre-gendered prohibition of same-sex desire becomes retroactively impossible to separate from each other, it is a process that begins with a prohibition against *something* that is experienced as the *same*, but only retroactively (*après-coup/nachträglich*) can be defined as same-sexed. What this may imply, is that there is a fear of the *same* (abjection), but this same does not necessarily have to be the same *sex* – actually, it cannot be anything named at all, since the object “sameness” that we are talking about here is nameless and without identity.

In other words, the fear of being dissolved by the *same* (as in the undivided, the abject, mother/child-dyad) is, if we follow a more Kristevian psychoanalytic model, necessary for any differentiation between “me” and “other” that is crucial for subjectification. *Being* the same *as* the other and *desiring* this sameness hence connotes a willing (and therefore “pervert”) return to an abject state: an imagined sense of completion where no differences exist. It is, paradoxically, this traumatic differentiation between an “I” and “you” that generates the desire to find such completeness in a less dangerous version (to avoid psychosis, i.e., the death of the “I”). This less dangerous version – based instead on an imagined completion of *complementarity* (sexed positions/gender) is given to us by the Symbolic order which legitimates versions of desires that promises this complementary completeness, but, of course, never delivers.

Hence, travelling from the Imaginary into the Symbolic, the fear of the same becomes sexed, and heterosexuality becomes the major (broken) promise of a less dangerous completeness, now based on complementarity rather than radical sameness. Homosexuality is therefore often treated as a version of complementary heterosexuality (“one is the man and the other is the woman”), but it is a quite weak rejection of the imaginary fear of the dangerous sameness, since the “same” in the same-sex, at least for many heterosexual men, all too much reminds them of

the threat of a dissolved “I”; hence, their sometimes violent reactions toward both male homosexuality (which “must” be fenced off physically) and lesbianism (which “must” be controlled by introducing the complementary difference, i.e., the man, to correct the relation). But this it is all *after sex*, to paraphrase Lee Edelman (2007).

The Spectre of the Same that is More than One

As is well known, Butler is not uncritical of the sexual difference school. In a later article she writes:

At the time [when she wrote *Gender Trouble*], I understood the theory of sexual difference to be a theory of heterosexuality. And I also understood French feminism, with the exception of Monique Wittig, to understand cultural intelligibility not only to assume the fundamental difference between masculine and feminine, but to reproduce it. (Butler 2004, 208–9)

And she continues:

The problem arises when we try to understand whether sexual difference is necessarily heterosexist. Is it? Again, it depends on which version you accept. [...] I take the point that the sociological concepts of gender, understood as women and men, cannot be reducible to sexual difference. But I worry still, actively, about understanding sexual difference as operating as a symbolic order. What does it mean for such an order to be symbolic rather than social? And what happens to the task of feminist theory to think social transformation if we accept that sexual difference is orchestrated and constrained at a symbolic level? If it is symbolic, is it changeable? [...] And what if we have indeed done nothing more than abstracted the social meaning of sexual difference and exalted it as a symbolic and, hence, presocial structure? Is that a way of making sure that sexual difference is beyond social contestation? (Butler 2004, 212)

Though I will not be able to provide any answers to these questions, I believe there may be some more questions that can be added, for example,

is a sexed desire the only possible differentiation from the imaginary threat of sameness? Is homosexual desire really a desire for the *same*, i.e., is gender the only possible mark of difference whence in the Symbolic order? If sexual difference is an unresolvable question, in what ways may the insight that it is unresolvable help us change the social so that the retroactive threat of punishment reaching from the Symbolic into the Imaginary can be perceived as less threatening, or can we perhaps even prevent the social from providing us with the “safe resort” of gender, and do we not then need to provide another resort?

Sexual difference does not in itself connote an essentialist gender ontology, which Butler (2004; see also Butler and Weed 2011 on Joan Scott’s related take on sexual difference) points out in later articles. Rather, as Butler (2004, 192) puts it, “we make no decision on what sexual difference is but leave that question open, troubling, unresolved, propitious.” In this sense, sexual difference is always an open question to which all our answers are always already futile (but sometimes very powerful) attempts.

Abjection (which Butler takes from Julia Kristeva) in relation to fear and pain (which she takes from Freud) is also central to understand the need for identifications that are constituted by the foreclosure of some desires and the iteration of other desires. In a passage from *Bodies that Matter* Butler mentions a “trembling body” – the body that seeks regulation to evade the truth about its own limits:

There must be a body trembling before the law, a body whose fear can be compelled by the law, a law that produces the trembling body prepared for its inscription, a law that marks the body first with *fear* only then to mark it again with the symbolic stamp of sex. (Butler 1993, 101)

It is not fear itself that *causes* sexualization; rather fear facilitates sexualization (in the form of gender) as a resort away from other possible and fearful “samenesses.” It is such disavowed possibilities that makes *gender* melancholic: the impossibility of acknowledging the perceived loss of a body that could have been something else, other, nothing and every-

thing. Melancholy is the incorporation of that unacknowledged loss and the gendered performativity conceals the trembling body from ourselves and others. There is no resolution in melancholy; the body does not really stop trembling just because it is foreclosed, rather the foreclosure gives rise to anxieties and desires to confirm and reconstitute the differences between the sexes:

He wants the woman he would never be. He wouldn't be caught dead being her: therefore he wants her. She is his repudiated identification (a repudiation he sustains as at once identification and the object of his desire). One of the most anxious aims of his desire will be to elaborate the difference between him and her, and he will seek to discover and install proof of that difference. His wanting will be haunted by a dread of being what he wants, so that his wanting will also always be a kind of dread. (Butler 1997, 137)

Faced with the threat of abjection (i.e., an “I” dissolved into the “other”), gender is used as an escape from an annihilated subject. The threat, however, does not in itself carry any pre-sexed desires; the fear of such a dissolving is rather connected to the constitution of the *death drive* (Freud) or *jouissance* (Lacan): an unbearable sense of being simultaneously everything and nothing, a state that is both terrible and alluring (an allure that must remain unacknowledged). The trembling body, as I see it, is the unsexed, simultaneously limited and unlimited body that no one can “be” – neither straight nor gay, transgendered, intersexual, nor any other body already, always relating to “the symbolic stamp of sex.” Which is every body.⁵

What homosexual desire can “be,” then, is an insider-spectre:⁶

The binarism of feminized male homosexuality, on the one hand, and masculinized female homosexuality, on the other, is itself produced as the restrictive spectre that constitutes the defining limits of symbolic exchange. Importantly, these are spectres produced by that symbolic as its threatening outside to safeguard its continuing hegemony. (Butler 1993, 104)

And, Butler, adds, so can the body marked as feminine – or rather, the embodied desires mentioned above are perhaps all examples of bodies marked as feminine, since they are all marked by femininity, that is bodies that are not “only” male (since masculinity seems to work by the one-drop-rule – one taint of femininity and it is no longer masculinity; creating a whole lot of feminine bodies). This position, Butler (1993, 103) insists, can be more than a traditional figure of castration “symbolizing at once the threat to the masculine position [castration anxiety] as well as the guarantee that the masculine ‘has’ the phallus.” And it can (also) be the mark of *every one’s* failed gender:

Although the feminine position is figured as already castrated and, hence, subject to penis envy, it seems that penis envy marks not only the masculine relation to the symbolic, but marks every relation to the having of the phallus, that vain striving to approximate and possess what no one ever can have, but anyone sometimes can have in the transient domain of the imaginary. (Butler 1993, 105)

However, because the masculine position insists *more* on having the phallus, it also *fails* more. And, consequently, also disavows this failure more to be able to reiterate the law.

Here I want to briefly mention the role of sameness in Luce Irigaray, of which Butler writes:

[Irigaray] even implicitly theorized a certain kind of homoerotic love between women when those lips were entangled to the extent that one couldn’t tell the difference between the one and the other (*and where not being able to tell the difference was not equivalent to “being the same”*). (Butler 2004, 208, my emphasis)

It is the social category gender, I believe, that conflates same-sex with sameness, while as Butler can be seen to argue, there are other differences that are not gender but still manage to obtain a difference between the self and the other (homosexual desire being one example, as well as

the feminine position). The subject, to complicate matters, is actually already differentiated to itself (see e.g., Butler 2004, 150–1). Homosexual desire and the feminine position are both examples of “where not being able to tell the difference was not equivalent to ‘being the same’” and are hence reminders of every subject position’s “flight” into gender and the subsequent repudiations of being a split(ing) subject – including the masculine position, which only differs in its symbolically closer relation to the phallus (masculinity as a symbolically more “gratifying” resort, if you will, making the male gendered less prone to feel unease with the sexed body).⁷

The Politics of the Trembling Body

I would like to claim that the privileged position of desire in Butler’s revision of the oedipal drama (or, rather, the prequel to that drama) implodes identification and desire: we desire an identification, hence this identification is never free from desire. This has an effect on how to understand, for instance, transsexualism that may differ from that of some transsexuals – mainly because it is seen as important for some trans-activism to “cleanse” trans-identity from desire. The reason for this may be the medical (and heteronormative) diagnosis of transsexualism, where a heterosexual desire in the post-op-gender is considered more convincing; as a response to this, a downplaying of desire opens up for a broader definition of transsexualism, and hence access to surgery.⁸ However, identification (especially in relation to gender) can never be wanted without desire: “To identify is not to oppose desire. Identification is a phantasmatic trajectory and resolution of desire [...]” (Butler 1993, 99). I believe, the kind of trans-activism that distances itself from desire as constituting gender, is one (of many) example of the “trembling body” at work, a body trying to take a resort into a pure and proper symbolic gender without connotations to any possible threats of abject desires. In contrast to the heterosexual melancholic’s “wanting to have that which I am not,” transsexualism (and some other transgender-identities) may adhere to a variation of this melancholic desire: “wanting to be that which I am not.” In a sense, this variation is an example of

what Butler (1993, 103) calls “the phallus that circulates out of line,” though today I am not sure such a desire can be totally separated from the entrepreneurial self-regulating subjectivity celebrated by capitalist late modernity, where the limits of the body are seen as “challenges” to be overcome and the Cartesian mind as always stronger, and more legitimate, than the body.⁹

Given this reasoning, we could argue that there are two circumstances that may constrain transsexualism and other transgenderisms; firstly, the already mentioned dependency on disavowing the desire connected to all and any gender identities enforces the need to point to an inner gendered core, disconnected from desire, but connected to the liberal right to “be who you are” and to become your “own person.” This split between gender and desire is not an uncommon or unrealistic political strategy in some contexts (especially medical), but it does foreclose the constituting power structure of such a desire, positioning transsexualism and transgenderism as autonomous in relation to other gendered positions (often, paradoxically, defined as less free or more regulated versions). The gendered core in transsexualism or transgender is not apprehended as an effect of any order of desire: it just “is.” Secondly, within the Symbolic order, transgenderism (and especially transsexualism) is a figure for the desire to be (wholly or partially) *other* – not the *same*. This is what makes transsexualism “comprehensible,” though of course not necessarily peacefully accepted, by a heteronormative hegemony and medical expertise. As long as transgenderism is defined as an autonomous mind’s questioning (gender) of an autonomous body (sex) – including both biologist and social constructivist versions of the dichotomy sex/gender – transgenderism may pass as a liberal rebel but not much else. As Butler (1993, 105) writes, “the failure or refusal to reiterate the law does not in itself change the structure of the demand that the law makes.”

In Nietzschean terms, this rebel could even be said to constitute a reaction to the law rather than a critical action. This ambivalent political position, of course, applies to homosexuality as well (and Butler’s take on homosexuality, too, differs from that of many homosexuals). It is

perhaps most evident in Butler's chapter on "the lesbian phallus" in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). Here she identifies how it is possible to describe female same-sex desire as an acknowledgment of the demand of the law, since using the phallus for other pleasures than the intended also constitutes a requirement for a patriarchal phallus to disturb. However, since there is not only an *acknowledgment* of desire involved in the identification of lesbianism, but also a desire supposedly based on "wanting to have that which *I am*," which likewise is the *feminine* (i.e., the threatening (m)other), lesbianism ends up acknowledging the constituting *méconnaissance* which threatens to expose and change the very demand of the law: "see, you *can* desire the same without dissolving, and then maybe gender is not that which necessarily have to constitute the difference between me and you." However, just because the figure of feminine same-sex has become the imaginary threat of sameness within the symbolic order, does not necessarily imply that lesbianism is "more subversive" (whatever that would require). It is only because of lesbianism's specific combination of (female) identification and (phallic) desire that lesbianism becomes a *heuristic example* of how gender is *not* the constituting difference, and how gender is rather nothing but a (usually quite bad) way to handle the trauma (in the psychoanalytical sense) of difference/sameness that haunts all identifications and desires. A trauma that Butler in universal terms puts in relation to "a body":

There is some body to which/to whom the threat or punishment is insistently compelled, who is not yet or not ever a figure of strict compliance. Indeed, there is a body which has failed to perform its castration in accord with the symbolic law, some locus of resistance, some way in which the desire to have the phallus has not been renounced and continues to persist. (Butler 1993, 104)

My, for the purpose of this short essay inevitably quite comprised, discussion on Butler's heterosexual melancholy and its relation to performativity thus leads me to a conclusion regarding political organization and solidarity. More specifically, I wish to conclude with a short reflec-

tion on some recent arguments for the need of a so-called intersectional organization. This is a politics that has partially grown out from feminist politics, sexual politics, antiracist politics and anticapitalist politics. However, recently these mobilizations seem to attach themselves to a politics of identity-based recognitions and rights and increasingly these activist claims seem to reflect a standpoint feminist tradition, which in turn often relies on structuralist definitions of power and oppression. As is well known, the concept of intersectionality derives from a version of American Black feminism that originated in such theoretical starting points but also was formulated in a very different context and period of time.¹⁰ The (re)introduction of structuralist standpoint feminism in late modernity, however, rather seems to fit the liberal discourse of infinite inclusions/disavowed exclusions and “ready-made identities” in need of a right-based emancipation. In an increasingly post-political setting, this combination becomes vulnerable to moralist identity-politics and, perhaps more troublingly, to a similar mobilization of identity-based organizations on the far right. To retreat to experiences of oppression, and to social identities, as a base and a requirement for mobilization, I would claim, enhances essentialist conservatism as the only politically legitimate alternative to neo-liberalism. Such an unresolvable antagonism between increasingly differentiating identities decreases the distance between words and violence on all sides, while the boundary between different bodies becomes more and more difficult to breach (see also Edenheim 2013; Edenheim and Rönnblom forthcoming).

Much has been written about the internal conflicts of the Left and in this case the relation between the melancholy of performativity and, what Walter Benjamin called, Left melancholy (as elaborated by Stuart Hall, Wendy Brown, and others) is very relevant. The hope to unite all radical movements on the Left in late modernity is a hope based on a belief that we must, and can, recognize each other's differences – gendered, racialized, sexualized. The unification is, in the Nordic context, commonly labelled intersectional politics. I would argue that a politics that has as its objective a requirement for acknowledgment of already existing social identities (no matter what this politics is called) will al-

ways run the risk of not only reproducing the requirements of difference attached to such identities (in the form of resentment enjoyment), but also of attaching itself to performativities of “rebel identifications,” i.e., to a politics of representation of sorts, where the presence of already identifiable bodies in the public sphere, media, and, especially, the market, becomes the measurement of the success or failure of democracy.

To think of sameness as a political point of departure, in this context, is often associated with essentialist and colonial claims of a universal woman (always white, heterosexual, and middle-class). Due to the weight of intersectional critiques against such claims, even entirely different arguments for solidarity through sameness can thus be met by accusations of blindness to different experiences of oppressions. I would argue, that such critique can very well identify normativities (and white, heterosexual, and middle-class are without any doubt normative positions), but this kind of critique sometimes also disavows the interdependency between the normative position and the marginalized or deviant position. By making politics out of the symptom (identification) but avoiding to identify the “disease” (our common fear of sameness/no difference/abjection), by requiring the recognition of differences but avoiding any recognition of its melancholic inclination, contemporary intersectional feminism, in the Nordic context and elsewhere, seems unable to take responsibility for, feel guilt for, or mourn, that which all feminist projects share: a dependency on a system we simultaneously despise and desire. Meanwhile and elsewhere, the other body that we, as humans according to a Butlerian understanding, all have but cannot stand, is still and always already trembling. This we can all (not) feel. This we have in common. This we can build solidarity on. For this body we need a radical politics, not of recognition of that body (it is, after all, not a body that can be recognized) but rather a politics of desire, i.e., a politics of what we *want* rather than of who we *are*. Only if we know what we want and why we want it, can solidarity overcome the identitarian borders and create new and other differentiations between us and those that want otherwise, no matter who they are.

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NOTES

1. It is perhaps by ascribing both performativity and Butler to social constructivism that Rosenberg’s definition of performativity goes awry (see Edenheim 2008 for a more detailed discussion on the general Swedish trend of classifying Butler as a social constructivist; for a specific critique of Rosenberg’s implosion of performativity and performance, as well as the tendency to conflate drag, homosexuality and subversion, see Edenheim 2003). It is possible that the more sociological (Goffman tradition), and explicit social constructivist approach by West and Zimmerman (1987) has played a part in this mix-up too, where their “doing gender” often is treated as synonymous with Butler’s take on performativity even though they relate to very different theoretical and ontological frameworks. Indeed, in Rosenberg’s introduction to the Swedish translation of *Undoing Gender*, an explicit reference to West and Zimmerman (1987) is made in relation to explaining Butler’s definition of gender (Rosenberg 2006, 11).

2. Joan Copjec's approach may also be helpful to grasp the social as a (failed) resolution or resort, rather than as a force that conforms identity: "We are constructed, then, not in conformity to social laws, but in response to our inability to conform to or see ourselves as defined by social limits. Though we are defined and limited historically, the absence of the real, which found these limits, is not historicizable." (quoted in Scott 2011, 12) I read this as part of the same critique of social constructionism as presented by Butler, and other poststructuralist feminists.
3. What this drag-as-subversive would imply for "ethnicities and other deciding social categories" is not answered by Rosenberg – perhaps the idea that a white person can act whiteness "wrong" by acting "black," and vice versa, too obviously contradicts the effort to universalize performativity as a tool for subversion? The relation between transgender and transracial is a complex and sensitive matter, worthy of a serious and theoretically informed debate that I am unable to offer here. However, it might be helpful to remember that Butler does not free all drag from misogyny, only points out its possible denaturalization of an origin: "Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles *are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture*, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself." (Butler 1990, 138, my emphasis)
4. In a roundtable discussion from 2007, Butler shows a certain dissatisfaction with this version of performativity: "For example, I am well aware that my work has become some sort of 'trope' in certain circles of *performance studies* and *cultural studies* ('Butler affirms that gender is subversive. We can clearly see it here, and we can celebrate gender as a subversion!'). Really, that is not a subversion, it is tedious rambling [*du rabâchage*]." (Butler, Fassin and Scott 2007, 293, my translation)
5. Butler's reading of bodily pain as the precondition of bodily self-discovery in Freud is, I believe, an example of the context the trembling body finds itself in: "One might want to read the psychic idealization of body parts as an effort to resolve a prior, physical pain. It may be, however, that the idealization produces erotogenicity as a scene of necessary failure and ambivalence, one that prompts a return to that idealization in a vain effort to escape that conflicted condition. To what extent is this conflicted condition precisely the repetitive propulsiveness of sexuality? And what does 'failure to approximate' mean in the context in which every body does precisely that?" (Butler 1993, 62)
6. The similarities with Lee Edelman's (2004) *sinthomosexual* are quite interesting. The importance of not assigning homosexuality or any other non-heterosexual position as emanating from an "outside" cannot be stressed enough. It is all too common in the social constructivist version of queer theory to talk about same-sex desire as autonomous in relation to heteronormativity, see for example Rosenberg (2000, 17). This approach creates an unfortunate image of a liveable "outside" capable of

overturning the norm and eradicating all differences and power relations – without having any ontology of its own and no prior relation (or responsibility) to the heteronormative “inside.” It is through such versions of queer politics that the risk for moralism increases (see Brown 1995; 2001; Edenheim 2011).

7. “The body marked as feminine occupies or inhabits its mark at a critical distance, with radical unease or with a phantasmatic and tenuous pleasure or with a mixture of anxiety and desire.” (Butler 1993, 104)
8. For the Swedish case, see e.g., Edenheim (2005).
9. To be very clear, this definition of transsexualism has nothing to do with the radical feminist definition (see especially Janice Raymond). Rather, it assumes that all subjectivities in late modernity are constituted by liberal and neo-liberal technologies of power, creating new rationalities of self-regulation in relation to both normative and non-normative genders and sexualities.
10. See Carbin and Edenheim (2012) for a longer discussion on the introduction of the concept intersectionality in a Nordic feminist context.

SAMMANFATTNING

Det är vanligt att betrakta performativitet som en möjlighet till subversiva handlingar som radikalt kan förändra vår relation till genus. Genom en om-läsning och omtolkning av några av Judith Butlers texter, menar jag att genus förvisso reproduceras och manifesteras performativt, men att performativitet inte konstituerar genus. Genus konstitueras genom heterosexuell melankoli; det är genom denna melankoli som inkorporeringen av könat begär/begär-ligt kön äger rum och den maniska repetition av genus som Butler kallar för performativitet är på så sätt snarare ett symptom på denna melankoli. Performativitet kan ses som psykiskt nödvändigt för att utesluta kroppsliga ofören-ligheter och beroenden genom att ge upphov till en psykosomatisk illusion av en koherent och autonom kropp. I bästa fall kan performativitet visa på andra versioner av genus som levbara, men enbart genom att använda sig av samma illusion av en koherent kropp. Denna användning av performativitet kan vara användbar för en humanistisk feminism som i första hand strävar efter att erkänna och humanisera marginaliserade subjektspositioner, men det är samtidigt ett angreppssätt som även kan riskera att individualisera identi-teter och ge upphov till gränser mellan kroppar i stället för solidaritet. De distinktioner jag försöker påvisa i min tolkning av performativitetsbegreppet

och dess relation till förkroppsligad melankoli kan därför vara väsentliga att påpeka för att undvika en (ny)liberal annektering av politisk organisering och aktivism.

Keywords: performativity, melancholy, gender, symptom, body, feminism, psychosomatic