

QUEER-FORMING TRANS OR TRANS-FORMING QUEER? - ON JUDITH BUTLER'S ACCOUNT OF SEX AND GENDER AND TRANSGENDER SUBJECTIVITY

By

Agnieszka Budek

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Gender Studies

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in
Critical Gender Studies*

Supervisor: Professor Eszter Timár
Second Reader: Professor Erzsébet Barát

Budapest, Hungary
2012

Abstract

In my thesis I focus on the relation between queer theory and transgender subjectivity. Since the figure of transgender infrequently serves to support the queer point concerning sex/gender incongruity or gender performativity I am trying to examine this relation in detail looking closer at the queer representations of transgender subjects. The main argument of my thesis is that queer theory, as it is developed by Judith Butler, fails to account for the specificity of the social situatedness of trans subjects and to see it as located in the bigger picture of limited social intelligibility. I develop this argument in three chapters each of which engages with a different aspect of Butler's theoretical account. In the first chapter I talk about Butler's approach towards identity categories, in the second I describe her account of gender and sex, and in the last third chapter, I focus on the concept of gender performativity. From these chapters I conclude that transgender individuals are infrequently assumed to be challenging the gender binary which they often are not yet recognized as part of. At the same time, their explicit desire to be recognized as "real" women or men is identified as the perpetuation of the normative social framework. I believe that using trans people as an example of gender destabilization in fact perpetuates the very image of them that some of them may be trying to escape – the image that depicts them as those who are always in-between.

In my thesis I tried to question the usefulness of certain account of queer theory, with an example being Judith Butler, for the social location of trans subjectivities. My point was to indicate that, although queer theory talks about transgender subjects, it fails to account for their particular social situatedness. While using them to support its own claims and to challenge the gender binary, what is overlooked is not only the fact that trans people are often not recognized as its legitimate part yet, but also that they might desire, instead of subverting the gender binary, to actually become a part of it.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I want to express how lucky I feel that I got to know my dear friend Sam with whom I had so many inspiring talks that have finally resulted in me deciding to choose this topic. Thank you!

And my parents – for being the best and providing me with the greatest support one can think of.

Next, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Eszter Timár, for her emotional support and insightful comments. Also to my second reader, Erzsébet Barát, for, first of all, agreeing to work with me in the very last minute, for her very thorough feedback and unforgettable support.

Then to my brother and a great friend, Tomasz Budek, for our talks, his exceptional engagement, patience and all the help, both with this thesis and with all the rest.

Monica Obreja – I cannot even think of words to express my gratitude for all the contributions she has made concerning this thesis, thank you so much.

Also, Hwa Yi Xing – for all the feedback, referring me to so many great sources, helping me to figure it all out but also for the amazing support – for giving me the credit from the very beginning.

To my dear feminist friends: Marianna Szczygielska, Barbara Mazzotti, Karina Worku, Ani Giorgadze, Zach Rivers, Irina Cheresheva – for patience, listening to my ideas, advising and simply being around.

I also want to express my gratitude to Jessica Brandler for agreeing to proofread my whole thesis in the very last minute.

Table of Contents:

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 1: Queering it up?.....	8
1.1. Introducing the Queer.	8
1.2. The Queer Dilemma.....	14
1.3 Questioning the Queer.	17
CHAPTER 2: Not Queer Enough? – Queer reading Trans and Trans reading Queer.....	24
2.1. Introducing Trans.....	24
2.2 Judith Butler on sex and gender.....	28
2.2.1 Gender	28
2.2.2 Sex.....	30
2.2.3 Drag.....	31
2.3 Trans reading of Judith Butler.	35
2.4. Subversive or Normative? – On False Dichotomies.....	41
CHAPTER 3: Performatively Speaking.	47
3.1 J. L. Austin’s theory of speech acts and its Derridean reading.....	47
3.1.1 J. L. Austin – How to do things with Words.	47
3.1.2 Jacques Derrida – “Signature, Event, Context.”	50
3.2 Judith’s Butler concept of performativity.	54
3.3 Thinking performance differently – “performing” trans.....	60
Conclusion	71
References.....	74

Introduction

In my thesis I focus on the relation between queer theory and transgender subjectivity. Apart from being politically significant, as I hope and believe it is, this thesis also represents a personal narrative of my own development in relation to the issue in question. Thanks to having met a truly wonderful person, Sam, I realized how much a project of this kind should be done. Sam is a transgender person who identifies as male and with whom I met in November 2011. He shared with me his personal narrative concerning his gender identity and told me how he relates to himself and how he got to terms with it. Surprisingly enough though, while listening to Sam, I found myself feeling some kind of discomfort, some awkwardness that I could not grasp back then. I felt like I was in fact experiencing the limitations of my previous knowledge, as though Sam's story was literally crossing and questioning my own capability of comprehension at that time. The theory of gender construction, queer theory's claim for the destabilization of gender binary, both of which were very influential for me back then, were not really helpful in understanding Sam's story but were instead confusing me even more. Sam was talking about the feeling of gender - how he felt that the body he was born with did not fit whom he felt he was and how his body felt wrong. I could not quite understand how this was even possible since there is no gender to feel prior to its social construction, social construction which works to create this very feeling – the feeling of gender is a naturalized effect of normative social workings. And, unquestionably, there is in fact the process of social gendering happening within the normative framework of gender binary and the cultural compulsion to fit it, but something seemed to be missing in that account, something what was making it hard for me to follow Sam's story. These feelings of awkwardness and discomfort that were accompanying some of

my discussions with Sam, together with the incapability of comprehending their exact cause, triggered my further engagement with the issue.

After I had decided to focus on the topic of transgender subjectivity, many doubts followed. Mainly, how do I talk about transgender people while not identifying as one myself? Am I in the position to do it? Is it appropriate to do it? Can I do it at all? I believe that these questions, while all extremely important to ask, did not incapacitate my research, for my thesis is not supposed to say anything about trans experiences themselves. Its point is not to explain what it means or feels to be transgender person for neither am I in the position to do so nor do I believe it should be explained as such. Instead, in my thesis I am trying to identify certain gaps in some theoretical accounts and their failure to recognize and sufficiently acknowledge the specificity of transgender subject positions. Precisely, I am focusing on queer theory since both the category of sex and of gender, that queer theory tries to destabilize, are often very crucial for the trans narratives but also because there are numerous trans critiques of queer theory. Prompted by my own initial incapability of grasping the issue in question properly, I have decided to examine in detail the clash between queer and transgender perspective and the reasons for which many scholars working on transgender issues find queer theory to be irreconcilable with trans narrative. Finally, given how many non-trans scholars appropriated transgender subjectivities in order to support their claims, as for instance the one about performative character of gender, I believe that the fact that I do not identify as transgender person together with the focus of my thesis, might actually be empowering through revealing often overlooked privileges and power relations that are entangled in the knowledge and theory production.

I find it necessary at this point to explain what and whom I mean when I am referring to queer theory throughout this thesis. By no means do I want to imply that queer theory is a

monolithic concept nor I am trying to do justice to its vast heterogeneity within those pages. Instead, I chose to mainly focus on Judith Butler's theory as a sort of representative of certain tendencies existing within some of queer theory's accounts. At the same time, I am aware that Judith Butler herself might have never really meant to found anything like queer theory nor does she necessarily agree with being recognized as one of its founders. In one of the interviews, Butler says: "I remember sitting next to someone at a dinner party, and he said that he was working on queer theory. And I said: What's queer theory? He looked at me like I was crazy, because he evidently thought that I was a part of this thing called queer theory. [...] It certainly never occurred to me that I was a part of queer theory."¹ Nevertheless, for several reasons I decided to examine the relation between queer theory and transgender subjectivities locating Judith Butler's account at the very center of this examination. First, Judith Butler's theory, especially her *Gender Trouble*, is widely recognized as foundational for the emergence of queer theory. Next, not only is Butler's theory distinguished by its unusual location at the intersection of different theoretical accounts such as gender studies, queer theory, gay and lesbian studies, transgender studies, feminist theory but also, her theory is very influential within those disciplines. And lastly, trans critiques of queer theory has been primarily directed at Judith Butler which, given my topic, constitutes probably the most important reason for having decided to focus on her specifically.

However, although it is Judith Butler to whom I refer while speaking of queer theory in my thesis, I start my first chapter by introducing the queer thought through Michael Warner's "Introduction" to the compilation of essays called *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. The choice to do so was mostly dictated by the fact that since Butler does not situate herself, as I have mentioned, in the direct relation to queer theory, it would be hard to

¹Judith Butler, "Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler", Interview by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal in *Radical Philosophy* 67 (summer 1994), p. 32

find within her work an explicit account of what queer theory might stand for. By choosing Warner I mean to give a general picture of queer thought, while at the same time trying to point out that Butler's theory, although not necessarily recognized by Judith Butler herself as the "part of queer theory", is in fact very close to the theoretical framework of some of queer accounts. And I have chosen Michael Warner to introduce the queer framework precisely because I believe that, his "Introduction", which opens up the whole collection of queer essays, serves to give this general picture which I needed. And indeed, I found Warner's essay to be one of the most solid and focused, while at the same time remaining a concise introduction to queer ideas from those that I am familiar with.

Next, I would like to explain whom I refer to when I use the term "transgender" and what is its relation to "transsexual". I use the term "transgender" as an umbrella term that covers all sorts of non-normative gender identities, including transsexuality, for this is the most common usage I encountered in the Anglo-American writings while conducting my research. Transgenders are generally thought of as individuals who do not identify in accordance with gender norms and their heterosexualized restrictions but they do not necessarily intend to have sexual reassignment surgery or any hormonal treatment. That's unlike transsexuals, who are associated with those who usually seek after changing their sex through hormones or/and medical surgery.^{2 3} Although I have decided to use "transgender" as an umbrella term, I am aware of the limitations of this classification and the objections it has

² Julie L. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy, "Transgender Theory: Embodying Research and Practice" in *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 2010, 25(4), p. 432

³ Though I would like to problematize this understanding of transsexuality by quoting Julia Serano's point which I find to be very important: "While some transsexuals undergo numerous medical procedures as part of their physical transitions, other either cannot afford or choose not to undergo such procedures. Indeed, attempt to limit the word "transsexual" to only those who physically transition is not only classist (because of the affordability issue), but objectifying, as it reduces all trans people to the medical procedures that have been carried out on their bodies. For these reasons, I will use the word *transsexual* to describe anyone who is currently, or is working toward, living as a member of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth, regardless of what procedures they may have had." (Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Seal Press 2007, p. 31)

caused. Since transgender is willingly and commonly appropriated by different theoretical accounts to support their claims, such as for instance the already mentioned theory of gender performativity, the concern has been expressed that the focus on transgender opposition to sex/gender congruence might in fact silence and make invisible how important this very congruence is for transsexual narratives. Some transsexual people claim to have completely different objectives from transgender ones and since the general theoretical tendency is to either overlook those objectives or to recognize them as conservative in juxtaposition to transgender-queerness, it is frequent that transsexuals refuse to be included under the transgender umbrella altogether. Nevertheless, I still use most of the time “transgender” as an umbrella term for I am not going to focus on what might be different between those two kinds of identity but instead I am talking about the social position of trans subjects as such. However, when I find it necessary to separate “transgender” from “transsexual” or, when the author I am talking about does, then I do make this separation trying to clarify my reasons for doing so.

The main argument of my thesis is that queer theory, as it is developed by Judith Butler, fails to account for the specificity of social situatedness of trans subjects. I am developing this argument in three chapters each of which, although obviously interrelated, engages with different aspect of Butler’s theoretical account.

In the first chapter I am mostly focusing on the relation between queer theory and identity categories trying to examine its potential for political (in)-applicability. I start with presenting the main ideas of queer theory through Michael Warner’s “Introduction” to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* and after I move to Judith Butler’s position on identity categories. Further, after having formulated the “queer dilemma” between identity seen both as empowering and oppressive, I argue that queer theory,

understood as a critique of the existing social frameworks and of the identity categories that are built upon them, fails to account for different subject positions that it claims to be incorporating. The differences in those positions are very tangible and thus, as I argue, the theory that wants to move its focus from the identity categories towards their destabilization certainly cannot be everyone's theory for simply not all subjects can afford it.

In the second chapter I am looking at the contexts and examples of queer theory talking about transgender subjectivities. I want to demonstrate how transgender subjects serve to facilitate making the queer point on the flexibility of gender and are used as the perfect examples of crossing the boundaries of gender binary and of questioning its normativity and also, what are the potential problems deriving from such approaches. I present Judith Butler's account of sex and gender and after I talk about her example of drag which she uses in her *Gender Trouble*. Since both this account and the drag example caused animated debates on the pages of trans writings, next I look at one of those critiques presented by Jay Prosser in his *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* where he points out the irreconcilability between queer theory and transsexual narrative. I conclude the chapter arguing that queer theory fails to differentiate between subject social positions and to see how much social intelligibility determines the way one gets treated and hence how it affects one's safety. Judith Butler seems to see the biggest potential in what actually makes trans people especially vulnerable to violence.

My last chapter focuses on the theory of performativity. I start this chapter with introducing Austin's theory of speech acts and its Derridean reading. After this I present how Butler is using Austin and Derrida to apply the theory of performativity to gender performances. And last, I suggest different understanding of gender performances which, although impossible to be separated from Butler's account, enables, as I believe, better

grasping of the specificity of social situatedness of trans subjects. The point of this chapter is to show that although Judith Butler uses transgender subjectivities to support her concept of performativity, this concept fails to account for the very subjects in question and to see that due to their social location, the notion of gender performance or subversion does not mean the same when it is applied to trans people that it means when applied to people who occupy socially more intelligible positions.

CHAPTER 1: Queering it up?

1.1 Introducing the Queer.

Organizing a movement around queerness also allows it to draw on dissatisfaction with the regime of the normal in general. [...], we might even say that queer politics opposes society itself.⁴

In his “Introduction” to the collection of essays, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* Michael Warner describes the shift from “gay” to “queer”. This shift dates back to the early 1990s when queer theory emerged in the Anglo-American context and gradually started gaining popularity among academic scholars and activists. Queer thought derives to a large extent from poststructuralist theories of, among others, Jacques Derrida and Micheal Foucault. Foucauldian inspirations could be visible in, for example, queer’s theory critique of social institutions and of the general social structure. As Warner points out, queer politics, though rooted in sexuality, does not exclusively deal with sex-related issues but instead reflects on all areas of social life.⁵ Warner thinks of sexuality outside of the public/private division, for him sexuality is necessarily embedded in the social - it is constitutive of and it is constituted by the social. Queer theory sees (sexual) oppression within the general frame of the normative social structure and its manifestations in the institutional workings. Therefore what queer activism aims at is not social tolerance or equality within the already existing framework but rather at the opposition and exposure of the very assumptions and foundations of modern society which are understood as necessarily

⁴ Michael Warner: “Introduction” in Michael Warner (ed.), *Fear of Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and London, 1993, p. xxvii

⁵ Ibid., p. vii

and intrinsically oppressive: “Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just as toleration or equal status but at challenging those intuitions and accounts.”⁶ Queer theorists point out that the society oppresses individuals through the normative organization of their space to which not everyone has an equal access and through numerous categorizing practices which are exercised in hierarchical and thus exclusionary binaries. Among others, queer theory challenges the gender binary, seeing identities and categories that are articulated from within it as inevitably caught in its heteronormative and homophobic framework. The heterosexual/homosexual divide is not neutral but it rather reflects the general social normativity - the homosexual exists only and always in relation to the heterosexual, its alleged original. As Warner quotes a French feminist theorist Monique Wittig: “[T]o live in society is to live in heterosexuality.... Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories.”⁷ Therefore, according to the logic of queer theory, embracing LGBT identities does not constitute an effective strategy for gaining political recognition but it actually reinforces the structural normativity and perpetuates the very oppression performed on LGBT people. Queer theorists try to destabilize identity categories by emphasizing the process of their social construction – identities are neither innate nor fixed but they are constructed through the cultural discursivity. The process of identity construction is necessarily normative since it is being performed through the oppressive norms of heteronormative society and therefore one, instead of embracing those identities as they are coined within the existing social framework, should challenge them, denaturalize and subvert. And the last but definitely not least from Warner’s points that I would like to call

⁶ Ibid., p. xiii

⁷ Monique Wittig as cited in: Ibid., p. xxi

attention to, is the challenge that queer theory poses in relation to the gender binary – “‘Queer’ is also a way of cutting against mandatory gender divisions [...]”⁸ Queer theory, as presented by Michael Warner, points out that the gender binary is too narrow to denote the diversity of different subjects and that is why the binary should be abolished altogether with all its identity categories and replaced by the in-definable and non-normative “queer world”.⁹

Now I would like to elaborate more on queer theory’s approach towards identity politics by examining Judith Butler’s “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, as it is significant for the development of my further analysis on the relation between queer theory and transgender subjectivity.

Judith Butler’s work is commonly recognized as foundational for the emergence of queer theory. In her “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” Butler does come out as a lesbian although she makes it very explicit how uncomfortable she feels when taking on this identity or, as a matter of fact, any kind of identity. As she writes: “I’m permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble.”¹⁰ Butler’s trouble with identity categories is based on similar premises as the described above trouble that queer theory, as it is understood by Michael Warner, contends with. According to Butler, identity categories are so deeply rooted in the normative discourses that it is impossible to escape those discourses from within and thus every attempt of avowing identity within that framework will necessarily end up in perpetuating the discourses that it claims to challenge. This means that identity categories always and necessarily serve as the reinforcement of the oppressive

⁸ Ibid., p. xxvi

⁹ Ibid., p. xvi

¹⁰ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in Sarah Salih, Judith Butler eds., *The Judith Butler Reader*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004, p. 121

heteronormative social regimes, even if they are actually claimed to be used to oppose those very regimes.

Furthermore, as Butler points out, the avowal of any identity category is always based on the disavowal of another – categories can exist and make sense only as long as they could be differentiated from one another, as for instance the category of “homosexual” makes sense only if there is the “heterosexual” to differentiate it from and to define it by being *non-homo*. Those binaries are never neutral but they are structured by hierarchies and the recognition of one’s identity depends on the exclusion of the identity of someone else. Therefore recognition is never random but who gets excluded and whose intelligibility is built upon that exclusion is indicative of the workings of actual social regimes.

Continuing along this logic, Judith Butler analyzes the phenomenon of “coming out” claiming that “[...] being “out” always depends to some extent on being “in”; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being “out” must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as “out”.¹¹ According to Butler, the concept of coming out inseparably depends on the existence of the closet, it reinscribes the closet all over again for if everyone were out, the very concept of coming out would not make sense, nor would the concept of the closet. In other words, for someone to come out, it always takes someone else who is in (the closet), and who cannot come out. Butler also opposes the idea of coming out because it is rooted in the discourse of authenticity, which constitutes one of the main building blocks of identity politics. Coming out is a sort of revoking one’s sexual past, disidentifying with it, it is like saying: “Look, this is who I really am and what you know about me so far is a lie because I was not myself before”. Coming out renders one’s past sexual experiences as inauthentic, not real, not desirable and being only the result of one’s

¹¹ Ibid., p. 123

real suffering and suppressed self that comes out now and can at last be for real, can be authentic. For Judith Butler all the claims for authenticity are performative acts but I am discussing performativity now only to the extent that it is necessary for explaining Butler's approach to identity politics, which is the main focus of this chapter. I will elaborate it more in the third chapter while presenting Butler's concept of gender performativity.

According to Butler there is no identity as such, no true-self that is prior to the gender performance - everyone is inauthentic, or rather non-authentic. Hence, when Butler comes out as a lesbian at the beginning of "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", it has nothing to do with the concept of coming out as rooted in the discourse on/of authenticity but for her it is enacted as a purely strategic move with the final aim of challenging it. Butler sees the distinction discourse of authenticity versus inauthenticity as a chance to expose the very premises the former is built upon, the underlying assumptions that there is something real or authentic in the first place. She discusses the heterosexual claim to originality as it is juxtaposed to its alleged homosexual imitation and claims that what should be argued for is not that homosexuality is (also) original but that there is no origin at all:

In other words, the negative constructions of lesbianism as a fake or a bad copy can be occupied and reworked to call into question the claims of heterosexual priority. [...], lesbian sexuality can be understood to redeploy its "derivativeness" in the service of displacing hegemonic norms. Understood in this way, the political problem is not to establish the specificity of lesbian sexuality over and against its derivativeness, but to turn the homophobic construction of the bad copy against the framework that privileges heterosexuality as origin, and so "derive" the former from the latter.¹²

Butler argues that the naturalization of heterosexuality through the notion of originality is possible only as a result of the repetition of a series of performative actions through which the apparent coherence of heterosexual identity is established. The very necessity of the constant repetition not only shows the lack of "natural" fixity that heterosexuality is supposed

¹² Ibid., p. 124

to have (it only has to be constructed), but it also subjects heterosexuality to the risk of failing to perform its own ontological primacy. Butler points out that for something to be recognized as origin, it takes a copy that this origin could be differentiated from. This very logic questions the self-evident character of the causal relation between the heterosexual origin and its homosexual copy since the supposed primacy of heterosexuality is entirely dependent on the “derivative” or “secondary” homosexual. The homosexual, which is presented as a mere copy of *the* heterosexual origin, turns out to be the prerequisite for the very existence of the heterosexual and thus its claim to ontological primacy seems to be putting an end to itself due to its own paradoxical logic. As Butler writes, the existence of the origin should be obviously prior to the existence of its copy and since it appears that in case of the heterosexual origin and its homosexual copy, the homosexual needs to be there for the heterosexual to exist in the first place, it could be argued that, ironically, it is in fact the homosexual that is the origin for the heterosexual copy. But Butler says that it is not enough to invert the order of that implication, she does that “only” to expose the major fallacy that this logic is built upon: “[...] the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term.”¹³ Hence the very necessity of performing heterosexuality exposes its constructedness by showing that there is in fact no original or “a gender proper to one sex rather than another”¹⁴ but everything is a mere copy or imitation of the “naturalized idealization”.¹⁵

To sum up, queer theory as developed by Warner and Butler, serves as a critique of the existing social frameworks and the identity categories that are produced by them. It finds those categories necessarily (hetero)normative and oppressive and, in turn, any political

¹³ Ibid., p. 128

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 127

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 129

agenda that derives from them is bound to end up as the reinforcement of those oppressive regimes, even if it claims to stand exactly for the opposite. Therefore what needs to be done, according to queer theorists, is to challenge the very premises that the existing system is built upon, to destabilize identities that derive from it together with the very concept of identity, to blur the boundaries of its binary categories and finally, to expose and subvert its foundational logics. Identity categories make, as Butler argues, “stumbling-blocks” or “necessary trouble” and hence they need to be questioned and denaturalized through challenging the very claims that underlie them, as for instance the major claim for authenticity. Since many social movements are deeply embedded in identity politics and find it completely essential for their political agenda to organize themselves around a supposedly shared self-same identity, queer theory has caused some quite animated reactions both amongst scholars and activists. Now I would like to examine the possible problems and dilemmas that queer theory provokes using Joshua Gamson’s “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma” and Steven Seidman’s “Identity and Politics in a “Postmodern” Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes”.

1.2 The Queer Dilemma

In his “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma” Joshua Gamson examines the political consequences of queer theory for social theory and movements focusing mainly on its rejection of identity categories where he locates the main queer challenge. In the abstract of the article Gamson defines the “queer dilemma” as follows: “Fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power”¹⁶ and that is what makes the queer versus identity politics debate extremely political,

¹⁶ Joshua Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma”, *Social Problems*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Aug., 1995), p. 390

crucial and definitely not easy to solve. I would like to start with what Gamson recognizes as the points where “the boundary-strippers”¹⁷ are right.

On the one hand, Gamson critiques gay and lesbian movements for not questioning the social framework that put them into the position of minorities in the first place. Thus, exactly for those reasons, he finds queer theory’s challenge to those regimes to be its great advantage. In Gamson’s opinion the challenge of the existing social framework is necessary because otherwise, as he argues, the oppressive categories are only being reified and reinforced. By referring to identities as if fixed and “natural”, gay and lesbian movements underestimate the political meaning of cultural and social subjects’ construction and by doing so, they cut off the political potential of subverting it which queer theory sets as one of its main goals.

Yet, although Gamson recognizes the political potential that arises from queer thought, he is still able to identify the threat that queer theory poses to the lesbian and gay movements that derive from the sense of shared identities amongst their members. As he writes, “queerness in its most distinctive forms shakes the ground on which gay and lesbian politics has been built, taking apart the idea of “sexual minority” and a “gay community”, indeed of “gay” and “lesbian” and even “man” and “woman”.”¹⁸ Queer theory, through its call for wiping out identity categories, questions the political usefulness of the very foundation on which the gay and lesbian movement, their political agenda together with its everyday activism, have been built. According to some queer theorists, there is nothing like stable and coherent sexual identity and this questions the very “we” of those movements and expose them as a mere, socially construed (normative) creation.

And although, as Gamson argues, perhaps there is even no way out from this dilemma, noticing it and acknowledging is certainly a step to facilitate its way within – to see that

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 400

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 390

neither the entire destabilization of identity categories nor fixing them works all the time and for everyone but rather it should be contextualized and adjusted to particulate social arrangements.¹⁹

Steven Seidman, in his “Identity and Politics in a “Postmodern” Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes”, while commenting on the queer move of rejecting identity categories altogether, makes a remark which I find extremely relevant: “The poststructuralist critique of the logic of identity ends in a refusal to name a subject.”²⁰ And indeed, it seems that it is not only identity boundaries that queer politics’ agenda makes blurred but through its claim for the destabilization of identities, it blurs the subject of queer theory itself. Continuing along this logic, Seidman argues that what has been initially presented as an anti-identity politics, ends up turning into politics against identity.²¹ Queer theory addresses individuals, regardless of the differences or similarities in their social locations and embraces them all under the identity-less, un-defined and fluid “queer” umbrella. And thus the question that strikes me at this point is: whose politics is queer politics? Whose agenda is this? And finally, who is the queer subject? Although I find queer theory to be politically relevant for it recognizes and challenges the oppression that is located in the very premises of the existing social realm, I would like to argue that queer theory fails to account for different subject positions and therefore the queer claim for deconstruction might appear as a somewhat privileged claim to make in the first place.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 402-403

²⁰ Steven Seidman, “Identity and Politics in a “Postmodern” Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and London), 1993, p. 132

²¹ Ibid., p. 133

1.3 Questioning the Queer.

In his article Steven Seidman reflects also on the situation of gay and lesbian movements in the early 1970s and 80s. He writes that due to male domination in the movements that were claiming to be both about gays and lesbians, many lesbian feminists decided to withdraw from them and engage into separatist gender-based politics. The new separatist agenda in the lesbian movement also turned out to be quite exclusive for some of its members felt like it was embedded in white middle-class privileges, excluding non-white and/or lower-class women. Women of color felt like their different social situatedness was not represented in the agenda of the lesbian movement and therefore in some aspects they felt in fact, as Seidman writes, more connected to men of color than to white lesbians. The ability of middle class white lesbians to cut themselves off from white gay men and engage in separatist politics on their own seemed like a privilege of a kind for lesbians of color who had to deal not only with homophobia but also with racism performed by the white lesbian movement among others. Seidman, mentioning the lesbian feminist Barbara Smith, writes: “[...] being an African-American lesbian is not a minor variation on an essentially common lesbian experience; it is not a matter of adding race to gender oppression. Rather, race alters the meaning and social standpoint of being a lesbian.”²² And it is exactly this crucial alteration that the separatist movement which is organized solely around the category of gender appropriate sexuality fails to account for. A homosexual woman of color cannot identify with the political agenda that recognizes and acknowledges her experience of homophobia while at the same time ignores the racism she faces for racism and homophobia are not two unconnected kinds of oppression and none of them could be said to matter more but they equally contribute to what it means to be a lesbian of color. Their subject position is

²² Ibid., p. 119

located at the intersection of categories that, significantly affects the way their identity is being lived. Separatist politics, such as the lesbian movement in the 1980s as described by Seidman, fails to account for those significant differences in the subject's situatedness since the very idea that founds separatism consists in singling out only one of many intersecting categories that constitutes the experiences of individuals' lives. Thus it seems clear that some different politics is needed, one that would approach identity categories differently and that would be more inclusive. It seems to me that queer theory presents itself as a promise of being that politics, it claims to be able to include everyone, or rather anyone regardless of their identities and social locations. There are no more identities in the queer framework, their boundaries become blurred and instead the flexibility, fluidity and queer un-definedness is being embraced. Queer theory claims to be celebrating differences, to incorporate them all under its queer umbrella while its challenge to the very logics that those differences are founded on in the first place is supposed to ridicule them to the point when they self-abolish. But then it seems to me that what is actually happening within that safe space of queer theory is that, together with the destabilization of identity categories, the differences in subjects social positioning are assumed to be destabilized as well. And that would be really great indeed, if the not-so-queer social reality "out there" was working this way but it does not and the inequalities between subjects located very differently in society are still there and feel pretty "real" to some of those subjects what, as I want to argue, renders the queer project as somewhat utopian and privileged dream of subversion that not everyone can afford to dream. And for all those reasons, the question that comes to my mind is: What is there about queer theory that is supposed to make it a better politics? In which sense and why is queer theory's explicit refusal to acknowledge differences between (social) subjects any better than the implicit one made by the lesbian separatist movement in the 1980s? The voice of lesbians of color was silenced by the separatist movement because their context turned out to be too

distant and different for white middle-class lesbians to see and acknowledge the exclusivism of their white privilege. Why then the queer political agenda that makes a claim to be able to include even more subjects of radically different social situatedness should work any better? If the voice of some lesbians was silenced within the lesbian community itself, why the certainty that it would be heard now while blended with even more different voices, or rather within an umbrella that challenges the differences between them in the first place? How can one know that queer theory will not be racist, transphobic, classist or sexist anymore? And I do realize that one might claim that all those questions are not even valid in this context for they all assume the existence of some identity categories for granted while speaking of differences or similarities between subjects. The categories whose function is to differentiate the subjects from each other in the logic that founds those questions, are being deconstructed in queer framework, losing their *raison d'être* altogether and hence asking questions phrased like that might appear quite senseless. However, I would like to argue that queer theory's project cannot be fully fulfilled and will read as a somewhat utopian stance unless it accounts for the significant differences in the social positions of the subjects it claims to be including. The social situatedness of trans lower-class lesbian of color is surely much less privileged than the one of the cissexual white middle-class gay man and the differences between them are very tangible, no matter how much one might wish they were not and no matter how much one would like to queer them up. So then the question arises again: Whom does queer theory represent? Who is the queer subject? Since queer theory does not recognize and acknowledge privileges, or their lack for that matter, that come together with the social position of different subjects, I believe it is highly possible that it is the most privileged subject who gets to speak in a queer voice. As Joshua Gamson observes when describing one of the sides of the "queer dilemma":

[...] “queer” is just a slight shift in the boundaries of tribal membership with no attendant shifts in power; as some lesbian writers point out, it is likely to become synonymous with “white gay male” (...) as it is to describe a new community formation. Even in its less nationalist versions, queer can easily be difference without change, can subsume and hide the internal differences it attempts to incorporate.²³

If social differences between the subjects are not recognized, named and made into a significant part of the queer agenda, it is likely for queer theory to end up in the dominant discourse of a male, white, middle-class cissexual privilege, while at the same time contributing to the exclusion of other subjects through the underestimation of their unprivileged positions. If queer theory refuses to talk explicitly about race, class or gender affiliation then it risks ending up with talking solely about subjects who can afford not to talk about their race, class or gender affiliation and not to view it as crucial for their lives. The theory that wants to move its focus from identity categories towards their deconstruction certainly cannot be everyone’s theory for not all of the subjects can simply afford that deconstruction but rather there are some subjects for whom everyday life often might mean very material ways of experiencing the “realness” of those categories. As Gamson continues few pages further, “Deconstructive strategies remain quite deaf and blind to the very concrete and violent institutional forms [...]”²⁴ Subjects who happen to live at the intersection of more than one of the oppressed categories, such as sexuality, race, class or/and gender, are often subjected to many different forms of violence committed by the general social structure, institutions or simply in the everyday interactions. For those subjects identifying as *x* and/or founding a group of *x*-identified subjects might not infrequently serve as the survival strategy that they need to engage in for their own safety. Unfortunately, the queer claim for deconstruction seems to be missing that.

It appears to me that in order to identify with the queer agenda one needs to have a particular kind of social intelligibility – in order to put forward the claim for the

²³ Joshua Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma”, p. 396

²⁴ Ibid., p. 400

destabilization of identity, one's identity has to be already recognized as socially valid and acknowledged in the first place. Since some subjectivities are not even fully constructed, I believe that the ability to engage in the queer logic of subverting them makes a privilege available only to certain kind of subjects. I am going to elaborate on the issue of the subjects' social intelligibility and identity construction more in Chapter 3. At this point I would only like to underscore that this is yet another dimension that comes to differentiate subjects.

Now, coming back to the example I brought up earlier, it seems to be somewhat easier for a cissexual white middle-class gay man, in so far as his identity is socially recognized, to perceive the deconstruction of his identity as his major political claim than it is for a trans lower-class lesbian of color who is struggling to be recognized as a "real" woman gender-, race- and sexuality-wise. Yet, if "queer politics opposes society itself" and wants to pose a threat to the social structure and its workings *in general*, then again for some subjects challenging society does not sound as a conscious political move. Instead, due to their situatedness outside of the normative framework of social intelligibility, "threatening" comes as a default quality of that positioning. The queer claim for deconstruction bears different risks for different subjects and it is usually those underprivileged ones, seen as a threat to be protected from, that become targets of violent actions. And of course, just as queer theory indentifies, it is in fact the boundaries of social intelligibility that need to be abolished and/or expanded since there is not enough space for everyone and not everyone can feel safe within them. But what I was trying to show is that queer theory, without accounting for differences in subject positions, ends up being a utopian project expressed in a language of white, male, cissexual privilege. The political agenda, in order to more effective, needs to be aware of the different contexts and social locations of subjects it addresses. Who, in which sense and to what extent and under what conditions can afford to *come to be* queer? There are certain situations in everyday life contexts; for instance at school, work, or other institutions, when

one experiences oppression to which the most effective and probably the safest reaction seems to be referring to one's identity and mobilizing others who identify similarly – "[...] *here, in this place, at this time*, we need, for our safety and for potential political gains, to construct ourselves as a group whose membership criteria are clear."²⁵

Queer theory, however, seems to be disagreeing with the necessity and effectiveness of the above strategy. As Judith Butler writes: "In avowing the sign's strategic provisionality (rather than its strategic essentialism), that identity can become site of contest and revision[...]"²⁶ Queer theory recognizes avowing one's identity as effective and valid only when it does not really refer to anything specific but it is rather used subversively, to expose the absurdity of the very claim for identity and of the very concept of identity per se. According to queer theory, identities should be claimed only in order to point out that there is nothing fixed about them but that they are rather constructed and temporary or, using Butler's words, provisional. But I believe that the recognition of the constructed or provisional character of identities does not necessarily preclude the possibility or even the occasional necessity for their avowal. Even if identities are constructed, the experience of violence that comes with some of them is rather real. The avowal of *x*-identity or identifying as *x* does not necessarily imply that the identity is fixed or prior to its social understanding. What it does imply, though, is that they are certain material consequences of occupying certain subject positions, of being a subject of *x*-kind. Such categories as race, class or intelligibility of one's gender performance organize social structure and daily interactions between people. The social reading of those categories shapes the way one gets treated, the privileges one is acknowledged and also those that one is deprived of. And it is exactly the position that one is located in due to the meaning of those categories, which constitutes one's identity and also

²⁵ Joshua Gamson, "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma", p. 401 (my italics)

²⁶ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", p. 126

makes one relate to other subjects that are located similarly. In this understanding, identity is not necessarily an essential and fixed category, as queer theory seems to be suggesting but rather it is constituted through subject social positioning and experience of injustice and oppression that one can share with other subjects.

To sum up, it seems to me that queer theory fails to account for different subject positions that it claims to be incorporating under its umbrella of fluidity. As I argued, those differences in subject positions are crucial for subjects' lived experiences and constitutional for who they are, how they see themselves and how they are treated. This is why I find it necessary to take them into account while forming a political agenda. Without accounting for those differences, we will not introduce much of a change in power relations and the one who gets to speak again will be the one who enjoys the most privileged position. I want to argue that theory which situates itself as political must necessarily recognize and acknowledge different extents and forms of institutional, social oppression and violence and account for the different contexts and situatedness of subjects. In the next chapter therefore I would like to move my focus towards the transgender subject and look at their subject positions and social situatedness. I am going to examine the relation between queer and trans: Why and in which contexts queer theory talks about trans? In which sense trans subject is (not) queer? I want to answer those questions by looking at the contexts and examples of queer theory talking about trans subjects mostly focusing on Judith Butler's account of sex and gender. Further on I will move to Jay Prosser's *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* and his analysis of Butler's account which Prosser carries out from the perspective of transsexual narratives.

CHAPTER 2: Not Queer Enough? – Queer reading Trans and Trans reading Queer

2.1 Introducing Trans.

As Viviane Namaste in her “Undoing Theory: The “Transgender Question” and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory” states:

For nearly twenty years, [...], Anglo-American feminist theory has been preoccupied with the “Transgender Question”. This phrase – the “Transgender Question” – refers to the ways in which feminist theory depends on looking at transsexual and transgendered bodies in order to ask its own epistemological questions.²⁷

These feminist questions emphasize the performative character of gender, the fact that biology is not one’s destiny and that gendered subjectivity is established only through repetitive gender performances within the framework of culturally constructed norms. In a similar manner the “Transgender Question” has been appropriated by some of the queer theorists. Transgender subjects serve to facilitate making the queer point on the flexibility of gender and are used as perfect examples of crossing the boundaries of gender binary and of questioning its normativity. However, as I will try to show in the following chapter, certain problems derive from such approaches. First of all, the exclusive interest in challenging, subverting and destabilizing gender binary, tends to overlook the context of individuals’ lives while at the same time it attributes to them agenda and desires that are not only not theirs but are also quite opposite to what those individuals might want and desire. Also, this selective interest solely in individuals who challenge and subvert the gender binary, ends up in some queer theorists implying a certain trans hierarchy for there are also those individuals whose lives, according to queer theory, are not that challenging – trans people who are apparently

²⁷ Viviane Namaste, “Undoing Theory: The “Transgender Question” and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo American Feminist Theory”, *Hypatia* vol. 24, no. 3 (Summer, 2009), p. 12

not queer enough. I would also like to argue, using Erin Calhoun Davis' article "Situating 'Fluidity': (Trans)Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity", that the queer and/or feminist debate which approaches transgender subjects as being either subversive or normative is built upon "false dichotomies"²⁸, as Davis frames it, that fail to account for the subject positions of transgender individuals.

It seems to me that trans subjects are discussed in queer writings usually in the context of their potential to trouble and to destabilize the gender binary. As Erin Calhoun Davis writes: "transgendered individuals have become ideal representations of gender disruption and fluidity because they have histories and bodies that do not reflect hegemonic expectations"²⁹ and some of queer theorists use those histories and bodies to support their argument on gender construction. Interestingly, those queer theorists seem to be very consistent in their rather selective choice of focus in regard to the transgender individuals - it is usually the transgender subject but not the transsexual one that serves as an example for gender subversion. As Jay Prosser writes in the introductory part of his *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*: "queer theory's approbation has been directed toward the subject who crosses the lines of gender, not those of sex."³⁰ Judith Butler argues in her *Bodies That Matter* that the materiality of sex is discursively constructed through the repetitive performances of cultural norms and thus is not prior to the subject formation but its meaning is actually being formed together with the cultural construction of the subject. To put it differently, according to Butler sex does not precede gender. She tries to show that one's body does not determine one's subject formation, that the matter of sex is not one's destiny. Thus, as Prosser argues further on, there is no place for a transsexual subject in the queer

²⁸ Erin Calhoun Davis, "Situating 'Fluidity': (Trans) Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 15, Number 1, 2009, p. 99

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98

³⁰ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 6

framework since in the transsexual narrative “*sex returns*”³¹ – it returns and claims for its recognition independently of gender which is quite unthinkable for Butler. I am going to come back to this point later in this chapter, but for now I would only like to point out how this transsexual non-fitting to queer theory contributes to thinking of transgender and transsexual individuals in binary terms, with the former being subversive unlike the latter. In her article Erin Calhoun Davis identifies some of the binaries in terms of which this transgender/transsexual dichotomy tends to be thought of, when she mentions following: stable/fluid, hegemonic/subversive, oppressive/empowering, upholding/subverting.³² But Davis argues that thinking of trans along those dichotomies fails to account for the very subjects in question since neither “fluidity” nor “stability”, as she claims, fully relates to the specific social situatedness of transgender subjects.

In her *The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* Viviane K. Namaste points out that in the recent past, in queer theory, there has been an increasing interest and number of writings on drags, performance or transgenderism.³³ Yet, as she argues further, there has been very little concern about the individuals in question themselves; the context of their lives, work or their desires:

Critics in queer theory write page after page on the inherent liberation of transgressing normative sex/gender codes, but they have nothing to say about the precarious position of the transsexual woman who is battered and who is unable to access a woman’s shelter because she was not born a biological woman.³⁴

In another article Namaste claims that queer theory and feminism use the transgender bodies to ask their own questions, to support their own claims in regard to challenging the gender binary. She examines further how queer thinking of transgender people as those who

³¹ Ibid., p. 27 (Prosser’s own italics)

³² Erin Calhoun Davis, “Situating ‘Fluidity’: (Trans) Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity”, p. 99

³³ Viviane Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgender People*, Chicago, IL and London: Chicago University Press, 2000, p. 9

³⁴ Ibid., p. 9-10

subverse the gender binary reads the desires that some of those people possess in a totally misguided manner. As for instance, trans rejection of their initial gender in queer framework is read as the challenge of the derivative relation between sex and gender, while for many transgender people this rejection actually stands for their seeking to accomplish sex/gender congruence. Moreover, this rejection does not undermine the gender binary with its categories of man and woman but it rather points out that it needs to be better accounted for.³⁵ Interestingly, Erin Calhoun Davis reports that most of her transsexed individuals whom she interviews in order to conduct presented in the article analysis, do not think of their transition in political terms, for them it was not a choice they had made in order to make any kind of political statement. As Davis quotes David, one of her respondents: “There’s not a political reason why I’ve done it at all. At all! But it ends up naturally by its nature making a political statement. And, and at times, I don’t mind mentioning it to people so political things could be done regarding it. But no . . . I didn’t not become one for political reasons.”³⁶ As Davis elaborates further on, some of the interviewees, though they did not decide to transition for political reasons, recognize the political meaning of it and thus often get engaged into the political activities. However, as she states, those activities usually have completely different focus than queer theory does for they are mostly about social acceptance, recognition and gaining rights rather than queer gender subversion.³⁷

In the next subsection of this chapter I am going to summarize Judith Butler’s account of gender and sex for those two categories are very meaningful and crucial for transgender individuals. As mentioned already, I have decided to focus on Judith Butler as a sort of representative of queer theory due to her peculiar theoretical location. Butler’s theory is

³⁵ Patricia Elliot, “Engaging Trans Debates on Gender Variance: A Feminist Analysis”, p. 8-9

³⁶ Erin Calhoun Davis, “Situating ‘Fluidity’: (Trans) Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity”, p. 120

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 121

placed at the intersection of gender studies, queer theory, gay and lesbian studies, transgender studies, feminism and she is of great importance to all these theories. At the same time, trans critiques of queer theory have been primarily directed at Butler and thus I found it particularly interesting and significant to look at this clash in more detail. Therefore, next, I will present the main points of the trans critique in reference to Butlerian theory as presented by Jay Prosser in his *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. And last, after presenting both Butler's and Prosser's theoretical accounts, in the last subsection of this chapter, I am going to engage further with the dichotomies through which transgender subjects tend to be presented in theory. When I am talking about queer theory in this chapter I mostly mean queer theory as developed by Judith Butler and thus it might happen that I use Butler interchangeably with queer theory and I do so in order to emphasize their close relation also the focus from which I approach the topic.

2.2 Judith Butler on sex and gender.

2.2.1 Gender

Already in her *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler presents quite a radical notion of gender, sex and the relation between them which she develops throughout most of her work. Butler questions the assumed naturalness, fixity and derivativeness of gender-sex relation claiming that both are socially constructed and sustained through normative workings of social regimes. One becomes gendered only as a result of repetition of certain conventional practices that are forcibly imposed upon her/him and there is no "her" or "him" prior to that repetition. There is no subject before the action and only the action, as necessarily embedded in the symbolic, establishes the very subject. Hence, it is impossible to even think of that subject as prior to the cultural construction for those thoughts would also be already

culturally constructed. As Butler argues, there is no “doer” behind the deed”³⁸, meaning that not only is there no “doer” *before* the deed but also that the “doer’s” ontological status is established only through those deeds, in fact the “doer” is those deeds. In this way Butler rejects any notion of interiority as for instance the claim for the “internal (gendered) self” or “internal (gendered) truth”. As she writes:

The articulation “I feel like a woman” by a female or “I feel like a man” by a male presupposes that in neither case is the claim meaninglessly redundant. Although it might appear unproblematic to *be* a given anatomy [...], the experience of a gendered psychic disposition or cultural identity is considered an achievement. Thus, “I feel like a woman” is true to the extent that Aretha Franklin’s invocation of the defining Other is assumed: “You make me feel like a natural woman.”³⁹

In Butler’s understanding the feeling of being certain gender is possible only as a result of entering and assimilating normative discourses that place individuals within the gender binary and signify them as female or male in sharp opposition to each other. One can feel gendered only when there is another gender to differentiate one from, which means that the very feeling makes sense only within the normative gender binary, this feeling is in fact its construction. As Butler argues, the gender binary is supposed to make one have that sense of inner gender in the first place - it naturalizes its existence through its own normative working. Judith Butler calls this normative working the “heterosexual matrix” which I would like to introduce using Alison Stone’s description of Butlerian idea which Stone summarizes in three points in her *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*⁴⁰. So the first feature of the “heterosexual matrix”, as Stone recognizes it, is the derivative character of the relation between sex and gender – one’s gender should “correspond” to one’s sex. This means that male born bodies are expected to behave in a manner that is socially recognized as masculine and analogically in the case of female born bodies in a respectively “feminine” manner. So

³⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 33

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29-30

⁴⁰ Alison Stone, *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*, Polity, Cambridge 2007, p. 63

what directly follows from this assumption is the second feature of the matrix – sharp opposition between biological maleness and femaleness. And this opposition is supposed to “naturally” result in the opposite characteristics of masculinity and femininity with examples being, as given by Stone, “aggression/nurturance, promiscuity/monogamy, assertiveness/deference”.⁴¹ The third feature, again, derives from the previous ones and it says that since men and women are that opposite it is only “natural” for them to aspire for the heterosexual completion from each other. Men must desire women and women must desire men because they are “naturally” meant to create the totality together, totality that cannot be achieved otherwise.

Butler identifies the heterosexual matrix, understood as sex/gender derivativeness “naturally” leading to the outcome of oppositional masculinity and femininity and heterosexual desire, as the framework that normatively structures the workings of society. Through the matrix, as she argues, the gender identity is being established and naturalized. According to Butler, the sense of the gendered inner core or substance is a mere illusion which is “discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.”⁴² The working of heterosexual matrix is sustained through the illusion of inner gender while, at the same time, the matrix reinforces this very illusion presenting gender as something that one *is*. But according to Butler, gender is something that one *does* and there is no “doer” before the deed.

2.2.2 Sex.

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 173

⁴³ Ibid., p. 10-11

In her *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler challenges the idea that sex is a passive and pre-cultural biological surface for gendered cultural inscriptions to be written on – according to Butler sex is as cultural as gender. As she argues, the relation between sex and gender is not derivative, meaning that sex does not determine gender. Thus consequently, masculinity does not have to necessarily derive from male bodies, neither femininity does from female ones and the fact that it is still usually the case results from the working of the heterosexual matrix which naturalizes the sex and gender relation. Butler claims that sex is also culturally constructed through the normative processes of socialization – it is only individuals' engaging in the conventional social practices that gives any meaning to the sexed bodies. Anything that could be said and thought of a body is already structured by the cultural norms and thus any claims that refer to sex are always already normative. There is nothing “true”, “inner” nor “real” about how one feels, interprets and relates to one's own sex but it all comes as a result of social regimes and the meaning that genders acquire within those regimes – “This production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*.”⁴⁴ In the Butlerian framework there is nothing like literal, material sex that one could possibly have any access to or any feeling of but rather sex appears as a fantasy built upon heteronormative presumptions – sex is always already gender, sex is gender all along.⁴⁵

2.2.3 Drag.

As I have already mentioned, according to Judith Butler there is no core gender identity or gender substance but rather a sense or a feeling of it is produced through the repetition of gender norms that are being imposed upon individuals by the heterosexualized social structures. The gendered interior identity is nothing else apart from those adopted

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 11

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 12

gendered patterns of behaviors that are being naturalized and fixed into the sense of one's "true" gendered self. As Butler continues with her argumentation, if the gendered self is a mere discursively constructed illusion then it cannot be true or false but it is rather contingent to the sexed body. As a perfect example that fully reveals this contingency of the gender-sex relation and also exposes the construction of one's gender core, Butler gives the figure of drag. As she writes: "[...] drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity."⁴⁶ Further on Butler writes that drag also "plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performance and the gender that is being performed"⁴⁷ – the sex that one is assigned at birth does not determine or excludes one's ability to perform gender associated with the "opposite" sex. Butler finds the example of drag to work as a powerful tool to expose the constructed derivativeness between sex and gender and to ridicule its heterosexualized and binary naturalization. According to her, this example can serve as an effective challenge to what is assumed to be natural and fixed by showing that the "natural" is in fact nothing but a mere fabrication. Butler also uses this example to support her claim about the original/copy relation which I have already presented in the first chapter. She says that throughout the performance drag mocks the very idea of original for the performance does not imitate anything supposedly original but rather exposes that there is no original at all. According to Butler, there is an actual realization amongst those who watch the performance, of the contingency of sex/gender relation and of the falseness or impossibility of the concept of originality, which is visible in their reactions:

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 174

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 175

Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary.⁴⁸

(...) laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived.⁴⁹

So, as Butler argues, the enjoyment which drag performances cause - the pleasure, the giddiness, the laughter – comes from one's seeing the performance as something that uncovers the fragility and the randomness of one's own self. In other words, one enjoys the show because one realizes how much constructed one in fact is. Hence, as Butler summarizes, drag effectively proves gender to be a mere construct and a copy which is discursively naturalized as an original and it exposes the contingency of something that manifests itself as fixed and stable. Its existence is entirely dependent on the repetition of gender conventional performances which puts it at a constant risk of failing to perform its own ontology.

In the chapter called "Gender Is Burning" of her *Bodies That Matter* Judith Butler clarifies and specifies her example of drag by somewhat narrowing down its scope of applicability. One of her main goals in this chapter seems to consist in pointing out the fact that "[...] there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms."⁵⁰ Significant part of the chapter contains Butler's reflection on Jennie Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning* which is a documentary focusing on the ball culture in the city of New York and its members that are very diverse, both race- and gender identification-wise. Butler bases her analysis on one of the characters, a transsexual woman Venus Xtravaganza who was a prostitute in New York trying to save money for the sex

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 175

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 176

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, London and New York: Routledge 1993, p. 125

reassignment surgery. As Butler writes, Venus desired to be a “real” woman – to find a man with whom she could share the house in the suburbs but unfortunately, Venus was murdered before it ever happened.⁵¹ Butler finds Venus’s personal narrative to be revealing that the trans denaturalization of sex does not necessarily challenge and subvert gender binary. According to Butler, Venus’s desire to become a “real” woman through medical transitioning, is still rooted in the normativity of gender binary where one can be either a man or a woman which always means having a body that is recognized respectively as male or female. Butler uses the person of Venus to show that “[...] the denaturalization of sex, in its multiple senses, does not imply a liberation from hegemonic constraint[...].”⁵² Venus does not subvert the distinction between one’s anatomy and one’s gender performance the way that drag in *Gender Trouble* does and thus she is not as politically promising and powerful for Butler as her drag example is. Instead, as Butler argues, Venus’s desires in fact reinforce the normative framework of gender binary.

To sum up I would like to quote last sentence of Mary McIntosh’s review of *Gender Trouble*, where she says that “Parodic performances, such as drag [...] cause the kind of gender trouble that Butler wants to make.”⁵³ Through the example of drag, Judith Butler tries to expose the social constructedness of the naturalized categories of gender and sex and their supposedly derivative relation. So drag indeed is there to trouble gender, to question it, denaturalize it and destabilize it in the way that Venus clearly cannot for she is tied to the oppressive framework of the heterosexual matrix and hence is too normative.

In the next subsection of this chapter called “Trans reading of Judith Butler” I am going to present the critique of Butler’s account of gender, sex and drag from transgender

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 133

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Mary McIntosh, review of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler, in *Feminist Review*, No. 38 (Summer, 1991), p. 114

perspective. In order to do so, I will mostly use Jay Prosser's chapter from his *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* called "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex".

2.3 Trans reading of Judith Butler.

In the chapter "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex" in his *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* Jay Prosser expresses certain concerns in regard to the relation between queer theory and transgenderism. As he argues, "[...] queer studies can be seen to have been crucially dependent on the figure of transgender"⁵⁴ – a transgender subject tends to be viewed by many queer theory scholars as one that crosses and questions the naturalness of strict boundaries between gender and sex. Prosser notices that queer theorists frequently engage in the analysis of drags using them to support the theory of gender performativity while transsexuals are marginalized as those who perpetuate the oppressive, (hetero)normative gender binary and therefore are not queer and subversive enough. Thus, as Prosser points out, this centrality of transgender figure in queer theory does not apply to and accounts for all transgender subjects for there is a visible binary established between subversive transgender and normative transsexual. Hence Prosser's main questions that he is trying to answer throughout the chapter is what are the implications of the queer appropriation of transgender subject and, maybe even more importantly, "what are the points at which the transsexual as transgendered subject is not queer?"⁵⁵ In his analysis Prosser focuses on Judith Butler for, as he says, her work, to begin with *Gender Trouble*, has most significantly contributed to the association between transgender as queer.

⁵⁴ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, New York: Columbia University Press 1998, p. 21

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27

According to Jay Prosser, the main goal of *Gender Trouble* is to challenge the fixity and the naturalized character of binaries that the heterosexual matrix is built upon such as, among others, heterosexuality/homosexuality, original/copy or sex/gender. Butler tries to expose the constructedness of their supposedly derivative relations by pointing out that the element of the binary that is assumed to be “natural” (heterosexuality, original, sex) does not in fact precede the second one (homosexuality, copy, gender) but instead both of them are mere discursive creations of heteronormative culture. Thus, as Prosser claims, throughout the whole book the figure of queer subject is being outlined – of the one who lives in between those binaries or, in fact, who lives outside of them. And therefore, when at the end of her book Judith Butler gives an example of drag, although it is being mentioned really briefly, it becomes quite clear who in fact this queer subject is. Having formulated the *Gender Trouble*’s trajectory this way, it seems quite legitimate to me Prosser stating that “the transgendered subject of drag is always in the margins of the text”.⁵⁶ As I have already mentioned, Butler uses the drag example to trouble gender by the reversal of categories, exposing the constructed character of the naturalized relation between sex and through this, shaking what is supposed to be unshakable, fixed and natural. However, Prosser argues that using drag as the most ideal example of gender subversion implies a hierarchy and certain conceptual splitting between transgender and transsexual subjects.⁵⁷ To elaborate on that splitting, Prosser distinguishes between two trans figures in Butler’s work: the queer transgender “troubler” in *Gender Trouble* and the transsexual in *Bodies That Matter* who is there to point out that not all trans people are equally queer and subversive.⁵⁸ But as Prosser aptly notices, the fact that Butler

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 26

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 26-27

⁵⁸ It personally took me a while to figure out how it is possible that Prosser draws in such an unquestionable manner the connection between drag and transgender. Contextualizing drag performances and pondering over my personal observations and experiences helped me a great deal. Drag shows usually take place in the space of queer/gay venues and in fact it is quite infrequent for the performers that their show is a part of a bigger picture of their gender exploration and/or identification which often happens to be transgendered one.

chooses to explain the limits of subversive queerness in the figure of transgender through the example of transsexual Venus is quite telling and indicative of not only that there is in fact the transgender/transsexual splitting but also that it has certain hierarchy attached to it – between the subversive transgender and not so subversive transsexual. Prosser continues that queer theory, by the implicit introduction of this splitting, proves itself to be incapable of accounting for the very materiality of the body – “In transsexuality sex *returns*, the queer repressed, to unsettle its theory of gender performativity.”⁵⁹

As I have already mentioned in my brief summary of Butlerian concept of sex, in her understanding sex is a cultural construction which does not precede or has any deterministic relation with gender. One’s thinking of sex is always already thinking of norms for there is nothing that sex is apart from those norms. In this framework it is impossible to claim for a sense of any “true”, gendered self because this sense, according to Butler, is a mere product of heterosexual matrix. And thus, as Prosser points out, there is an irreconcilable clash between Butler’s approach and transsexuals’ desires. First of all, while Butler argues that sex is a sort of fantasy created already in the framework of heteronormativity, that it is gender all along; the difference between sex and gender is of a crucial significance for transsexual narratives. Those narratives often relate to the feeling of being “trapped in a wrong body” and although there are also many more different transsexual narratives, they all are embedded in the material and literal understanding of the sexed body.⁶⁰ Transsexual individuals claim for being the “doer” before the deed which in Butlerian framework is completely impossible to

Moreover, in *Bodies That Matter*, when Judith Butler analyzes the person of Venus Xtravaganza she herself makes the equation between drag and transgender saying that Venus shows that “[...] there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion.” (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, p. 125)

⁵⁹ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 27

⁶⁰ For further reading see also: Myra J. Hird, “For a Sociology of Transsexualism”, in *Sociology*, Vol 36(3), p. 577-595 and Riki Lane, “Transitional Stories: Constructing Biology and Culture in a Transgender Clinic”, TASA 2007 Conference Proceedings : Public Sociologies : Lessons and Trans-Tasman Comparisons, pp. 1-8 (<http://www.tasa.org.au/conferences/conferencepapers07/papers/100.pdf>, accessed: 20/05/2012)

imagine. So what is foundational for transsexuals' self-understanding, according to Butler does not quite exist – while trans individuals built their trajectories on the sense of gender as *being*, for Butler gender is always and “only” *doing*. Therefore transsexuals have no place in queer theory because it does not account for the category of sex – one cannot possibly desire to be a “real” woman or a “real” man for such desire within the queer framework is unthinkable, it does not make sense and it simply cannot exist.

Continuing along this logic, Prosser makes a distinction between corporeal reality and external surface of the body.⁶¹ As he argues, the transsexual trajectory is often built upon the *feeling* of being of a different gender from the one that was assigned at birth. Thus, the transsexual claim about *feeling* gendered refers to the bodily interiority that implies the notion of gendered internal-self which does not make sense in the framework of Butlerian theory. According to Prosser, Butler understands gender solely as being expressed through the performances on the level of the “body-as-surface” meaning that for her, gender is exclusively about visibility, about looking and behaving like one of a certain gender. However, as Prosser writes: “The transsexual doesn’t necessarily *look* differently gendered but by definition *feels* differently gendered from her or his birth-assigned sex.”⁶² For Butler there is no gender apart from the one that is culturally produced and forcibly sustained through the gendered performances⁶³ and hence, any claims for *feeling* gender prior to those performances are just discursive constructs of heteronormative culture. What follows then, according to Butler’s theory, is that if one *feels* gendered, it is only because one is socialized to feel this way which renders transsexual claim for the internal sense of gendered self as phantasmatic⁶⁴ and in fact, impossible - the foundational narrative for the way in which

⁶¹ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 43-44

⁶² Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 43

⁶³ I am going to elaborate on “gendered performances” in the next chapter, while talking about Judith Butler’s theory of performativity.

⁶⁴ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 43

transsexuals relate to themselves and to others is rejected in Judith Butler's account of sex and gender.

Approaching the end of his chapter, Jay Prosser analyzes Butler's take on the story of Venus Xtravaganza. As I have mentioned before, Butler uses the person of Venus to point out that there is no necessary implication between drag and subversion for the trajectory of Venus's live, her desires and her narrative do not subvert gender binary at all but rather reinforce it. According to Butler, Venus falls into the normative logic of gender/sex relation because she finds it necessary to have a sex reassignment surgery in order to be a "real" woman whom she desires to be. But subversion for Butler, as it is clearly depicted in her example of drag, rather means questioning the fact that for one in order to identify as either a man or a woman it is essential to have a body which is recognized respectively as either male or female. Prosser writes that Venus's death symbolizes the triumph of heterosexual matrix⁶⁵ but, as he continues, in Butlerian logic the heterosexual matrix took over Venus much more earlier before she was killed for her very belief that she needed a vagina in order to become a "real" woman (and that she can become a "real" woman in the first place) was already projected by the heterosexual matrix – "For Butler these desirers reveal the extent to which Venus, even before her murder, is subject to "hegemonic constraint"⁶⁶". Given Butler's understanding of subversion and her drag example, Prosser puts forward a few quite strong points while commenting on the implications of Butler's approach. Since Butler understands subversion as the denaturalization of sex together with the denaturalization of gender and as well as of the relation between them, as Prosser argues, it seems that what Butler could see as potentially subversive about Venus, is exactly what was making Venus unhappy – the fact

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 48

⁶⁶ Ibid.

that she never got to complete her transsexual desire and remove the penis in order to acquire vagina and become exactly the kind of woman she desired to be. In Prosser's words:

[...] what awards Venus the status of potential resignifier of the symbolic in Butler's scheme is the fact that Venus doesn't get to complete her narrative trajectory and realize her desires, because she still has a penis at her death. What matters for Butler is the oscillation between the literality of Venus's body and the figurative marks of her gender. Conversely, Venus's desire to close down this tension (what I am calling her desire for sexed realness, for embodied sex) curtails the capacity to resignify the symbolic.⁶⁷

Consequently then, Jay Prosser arrives to the quite overwhelming conclusion that what Butler sees as subversive was exactly the reason for which Venus was murdered and what she finds to be a normative curtailment of Venus's subversive potential, could actually save her life. So it appears then that Butler reckons as the most subversive something that puts trans lives in the mortal danger which Prosser describes it as "critical perversity".⁶⁸

This conclusion not only shows, as Prosser is trying to point out throughout his whole chapter, the limitations of the queerness of transgender subjects and queer theory's own incapacity to account for sex as material and literal category. It also seems to support my point that queer theory, as developed by Judith Butler, fails to account for different subject positions – in this case the specificity of social situatedness of trans subjectivities. Butler, due to her account of the gender/sex relation looks for and focuses solely on certain kind of subversion – one that has to do with gender, not sex. Using transgender identity as the best example of this exclusive notion of subversion, she ends up disregarding trans desires and the importance and the specificity of their personal narratives.

In the last subsection of this chapter, after having presented Butler's and Prosser's theoretical accounts, I would like to engage in more details with the subversive/normative binary through which trans subjects are infrequently referred to in some of the queer writings.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 49

⁶⁸ Ibid.

2.4 Subversive or Normative? – On False Dichotomies.

In her article Erin Davis points out that every individual, no matter if trans or not, is situated in the context of certain social reality and thus, in order to function within it, must, at least to some extent, follow its rules and adjust to its criteria of intelligibility. Social intelligibility serves as a prerequisite of social acceptance, as an allowance to function within certain social context and therefore, what follows is that the less intelligible one is, the more one's safety is endangered – crossing social rules, as it happens in case of any kind of rules, might be followed by a punishment. One of the numerous rules that the social context imposes on the individual is the rule of gender(ed) behavior as it is determined by the heteronormative understanding of gender binary. As I would like to argue, crossing or challenging the gender binary in way that Judith Butler understands it, requires occupying a certain subject position which is already socially recognized as valid. Thus, it seems like the very concept of challenging understood as such also comes from this already socially intelligible situatedness. As the above presented context in which transgender people usually figure in the theory might indicate, transgender individuals' are situated in the discourse in an already questioning position - in fact they are this questioning itself. Thus their narrative is often very different from the one that comes from someone who wants to challenge the gender binary while already being recognized as a part of it. Transgenders are assumed to be challenging the gender binary that they never really were part of in the first place and thus, due to their feeling of non-belonging, some transgender individuals simply strive to become a part of it. And this is exactly why Erin Davis recognizes the debate, quite common in queer and feminist theory, of whether transgender subjects are subversive or normative, as built upon "false dichotomies"⁶⁹ for it fails to account for the subject positions of transgender

⁶⁹ Erin Calhoun Davis, "Situating 'Fluidity': (Trans) Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity", p. 99

individuals and their social situatedness. Neither everyone's social positioning allows them to subvert or cross the gender binary, nor everyone wants it and to place transgender individuals as an ideal example of gender destabilization totally misses and misrepresents how some of them think of themselves and how they relate to their bodies and the world around them. What this discussion sets up as normative and demises as oppressive, one's desire to be a "real" woman or a "real" man in fact refers to the way that some transgenders see themselves and want to be seen by others, as it was in case of Venus Xtravaganza. As Davis writes: "Social authentication is significant to transsexed individuals because it enables them to be accepted and treated in a manner with which they feel comfortable."⁷⁰ Normative regimes built upon the gender binary forcibly structure everyone's social reality and set up criteria according to which everyone's gender performance is being assessed, no matter if one is trans or not. However, for a cissexual woman, due to her gender being socially recognized as congruent with her birth sex, to question her femaleness seems to be somewhat less threatening than if a trans woman were to do that. As Davis claims further on:

Gender transgressions may be more threatening to individual transgressors than to the social order. A number of transgendered individuals have been murdered because their status was perceived as inappropriate or indeterminate. Further, several respondents have been physically threatened or attacked as a result of their non-normative gender experiences or presentation [...].⁷¹

And exactly because the society is structured and ruled by those normative regimes and gender binary, what Judith Butler finds desirable and subversive about transgender people, exactly as Prosser points out, puts them in a high risk of experiencing violence. For the analysis presented in her article, Erin C. Davis conducted forty interviews with transsexual individuals, all of them based in the United States. While most of the respondents (92%)

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 106

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 116

publicly identify as a man or a woman, only 67% relate to themselves as such.⁷² Many of those individuals admit that the categories of woman and man do not represent their experiences and the way they understand themselves for they find the trans aspect of their lives crucial for their self-understanding. However, since they are located, just the way all people are, at the intersection of their own desires for gender self-expression and the limited social intelligibility of gender performances, many transgender individuals still choose to publicly present themselves as either/or for public recognition is strictly regulated by the normative rules of gender binary adjustment to which determines one's safety. All of the interviewees recognize the risk that the questioning of the gender binary might cause and thus some of them even find it necessary to, for instance, move out after the transition, remove all possible evidences of their past and simply start over.⁷³ Identity categories that are embedded in the gender binary are undoubtedly, just as Judith Butler identifies them, too narrow and oppressive but unfortunately, one is usually being read through them and the extent to which one might afford to hinder that readings depends on the extent to which one is already socially recognized as a valid subject.

As I have already mentioned, according to Judith Butler one's sex does not precede one's gender which means that it is impossible to think (of) sex without thinking (of) gender. Hence consequently, she focuses and recognizes only a certain kind of subversion of gender binary – one that happens on the level of gender, not sex (since the latter is quite unthinkable in the framework of her theory). To cite Patricia Elliot: "The questionable implication here is that there is nothing politically valuable or transgressive to demanding that transsexual women and men be given to the means to live ordinary lives as women and men."⁷⁴ And

⁷² Ibid., p. 105

⁷³ Ibid., p. 118

⁷⁴ Patricia Elliot, "Engaging Trans Debates on Gender Variance: A Feminist Analysis", *Sexualities* 2009, 12(5), p.

indeed, as Davis argues, transsexual's transitioning in fact poses a great challenge to the gender binary which is understood as necessarily resulting from certain fixed biological features.⁷⁵ Transsexual individuals question biological essentialist assumptions of what it means to be a woman or a man and by doing so, they expand the inclusivity of those categories demonstrating that they do not refer solely to people who were born with male or female bodies. And thus again, the subversive/normative dichotomy proves itself to be quite useless and inapplicable to transgender individuals' experiences and social positioning since according to it, the desire to be a "real" woman or a "real" man that many of transsexuals have, cannot possibly be subversive or queer but is seen merely as a normative perpetuation of the hegemonic gender binary.

However, my point here is not to show that queer theory fails to see transsexual bodies as subversive while indeed they are but rather to question the very focus of queer theory on subversion with regards to transgender individuals and expose it as unfitting to their lived experiences, their self-understanding and social situatedness. For, although transgender individuals might in fact question and subvert what it means to be a man and a woman and the idea that there is a fixed relation between sex and gender, some of them, for many reasons, do not reject identity categories but rather stick to them. Therefore, my question is: if transgender people never promised to be queer or political and some of them even explicitly do not want it, why does queer theory, or Judith Butler for that matter, expects them to be queer finding it normative if they fail to do so? Since some transgender people

⁷⁵ Erin Calhoun Davis, "Situating 'Fluidity': (Trans) Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity", p. 124

never really expressed the will to be queer or since sometimes it is exactly the opposite what they want, why then are they expected to be subversive more than anyone else?

At the end of her article Erin Davis poses a question which I find to be aptly problematizing the very assumptions that lie beyond the subversive/normative debate on trans individuals. As she says: “[...] it is neither fair nor realistic to lay the task of being a revolutionary vanguard at the doorstep of those who are already marginalized. We need to question why transpeople are assumed to bear the responsibility for upholding and/or subverting the gender status quo.”⁷⁶ This subversive/normative debate in fact seems to be placing this responsibility on trans individuals since not only it identifies some of them as subversive but also the actions of those who, for different reasons, cannot afford or simply do not want to queer up the gender binary, are seen as normatively perpetuating it. Judith Butler’s focus on gender subversion fails to account for those trans individuals who do not want to reject the gender binary altogether but rather strive to find their space within it through accomplishing certain congruence between their sexed bodies and their gendered-selves. So while some trans individuals explicitly refuse being seen as those who occupy the queer space of neither/nor, “unstable, or in between, or in the middle of things[...]”⁷⁷, queer theory’s emphasis on their potential to subvert the gender binary and presenting them solely in that context, perpetuates an image that some trans people are trying to escape. Also, it results in the implication of certain trans hierarchy with the subversive transgender on its one side as juxtaposed to the normative transsexual on the other. This hierarchical binary is built upon false dichotomies for it fails to account for the social context together with the normativity and the strictness of its gender rules that determine the extent of one’s social intelligibility and thus the way one gets treated. Having underestimated this, queer theory not

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 125

⁷⁷ Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, Lisa Jean Moore, „Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?“, in *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3/4, Trans- (Fall-Winter, 2008), p. 18

only ends up with seeing the queer potential in those who might in fact be at the biggest risk of violence but it also sees as potentially queer what actually subjects trans people to that violence in the first place.

In the last chapter I am going to focus on the theory of performativity. First I will introduce Austin's account of speech acts which will be followed by its Derridean reading which is necessary in order to grasp And Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which is going to follow. Next I will suggest different way of approaching the concept of performance through which I try to point out that Butler's understanding of performativity the best example of which she illustrates drag, does not in fact apply to transgender subjects the same way in does to people who occupy socially more intelligible positions.

CHAPTER 3: Performatively Speaking.

3.1 J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts and its Derridean reading.

3.1.1 J. L. Austin – How to do things with Words.

John Langshaw Austin's *How to do things with Words* consists of the set of 12 lectures that were delivered at Harvard University in 1955. Austin starts with questioning the “age-old” philosophical assumptions concerning the function of language as being solely descriptive – as he claims, some philosophers consider that language serves only to describe, state, report or relate to facts that have actually happened.⁷⁸ Consequently, sentences can be only true or false depending on whether they manage to accurately convey the reality or they fail to do that. Austin continues that according to some philosophers and grammarians sentences need to be necessarily verifiable, otherwise they are nothing else but mere pseudo-statements or nonsense.⁷⁹ Austin problematizes this approach by pointing out other possible applications of language, pointing to sentences that do not purport to describe or report anything and thus cannot be assessed as true or false. He gives examples such as “I do” uttered during the marriage ceremony or “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*” in the moment of smashing the bottle against the stem of a ship during the ceremony of naming.⁸⁰ As Austin comments on those examples, those sentences do not describe or report on any doing by they are actually the *doing* itself, they *do* something. Austin calls the sentences of this kind *performatives*, saying that: “The name is derived, of course, from ‘perform’, the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the

⁷⁸ J. L. Austin, *How to do things with Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 12

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5

performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something.”⁸¹ The lectures following the first one consist in Austin’s elaboration on his concept of performatives – when saying something is doing something, what it takes for the sentence to actually do something, what kind of performatives are there and further, what cannot be recognized as successful performative and why?

Austin starts explaining his concept of performatives by specifying that it is not words by themselves only that make things actually happen. As he says:

Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether ‘physical’ or ‘mental’ actions or even acts of uttering further words.⁸²

According to Austin, for the performative utterance to succeed certain conditions must be met. First of all, the context or the circumstances must be “appropriate”; for instance in the case of marriage ceremony, it takes not only the crowning “I do” but perhaps also, depending on the kind of marriage in question, two people who are eligible for it and the person who is in a legal position to approve the marriage itself. Furthermore, Austin also points out that occasionally it is necessary for the speaking person to perform some additional non-verbal actions like for example in the case of naming the ship – throwing the bottle against its stem. He mentions “mental actions” as well which might stand, as in the case of marriage, for certain kinds of feelings or the very intention to marry. Finally, referring to the initially mentioned philosophical assumptions, Austin argues that failing to meet any of these essential conditions does not make the performative utterance false but the performative is rather void or simply not implemented.⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 6-7

⁸² Ibid., p. 8

⁸³ Ibid., p. 11

Austin engages into detailed analysis of the possible failures that might happen to the performative utterances, calling those unsuccessful performatives in general *unhappy* or *infelicities*.⁸⁴ He distinguishes two groups of unhappy performatives which he names *misfires* and *abuses*.⁸⁵ The former refers to such cases as an incorrect application of certain required formula or situations when the person who attempts to perform the utterance is not, for some reasons, eligible for it. The latter stands for insincere utterances, when the intention is not there or when the procedure is abused in any sense.

Further on Austin somewhat narrows down the applicability of his theory by specifying the kinds of performatives he is not at all interested in:

[...] a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration.⁸⁶

Austin gives three examples of what he recognizes as, although I believe that for quite different reasons, peculiarly “hollow” or “void” performatives or, as he also calls them, *etiolations* and *parasites* of language. First example is stage performance, the peculiarity of which consists in that although on stage, the space could be arranged appropriately (when in scenes of marriage, for instance) and all the people would be there exactly the way it is needed, “I do” cannot possibly *do* anything because the whole situation is not meant, it lacks the intention, it is acted – in fact marriage performed on stage by actors is like a mere copy of the real event.

For understanding the peculiarity of the next two examples it might be helpful to point out that for Austin the exemplary, successful performative is uttered “in the first person singular

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 14

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 16

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 22

indicative active” – the active “I” *doing* something in and to the presence.⁸⁷ Hence, consequently, saying something in the poem cannot be possibly recognized by Austin as a *happy* performative for even if the “I” is speaking (or rather writing) in the presence it is not going to be the receiver’s present – the relation between the speaking “I” and the receiver is not direct and immediate neither in time nor in space. And as far as the third example is concerned, uttering the performative in the soliloquy cannot *do* anything, according to Austin, because there is simply no one to witness the very *doing*.

Austin recognizes those example as non-serious, *parasitic* uses of language and although, right before introducing them, he acknowledges that all performatives are at the constant risk of being used in that “non-serious” manner when he says that: “[...] as *utterances* our performatives are *also* heir to certain kinds of ill which infect *all* utterances”, he explicitly refuses to engage into the analysis of those and any similar examples.⁸⁸ Instead he goes far deeper into the analysis of *infelicities*, explaining in more detail differences between the two groups of *misfires* and *abuses* and divides them into even more, groups. The analysis of those specificities, however, is far beyond the argument I will try to make below. Now I would like to move to Jacques Derrida’s reading of Austin’s theory of speech acts as it is presented in Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context.”

3.1.2 Jacques Derrida – “Signature, Event, Context.”

In his reading of Austin in “Signature, Event, Context” Jacques Derrida points out that Austin fails to separate himself completely from the philosophical tradition that he claims to be leaving behind, because some of its assumptions Derrida claims are still at work in his

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 67

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 21

theory of speech acts. Also, as Derrida continues, Austin's move of excluding certain kinds of performatives is somewhat *dogmatic* and arbitrary.⁸⁹

As Derrida notes, the context or the circumstance of a performative extremely matters in Austin's theory, whereby even in the case of *infelicities* it is the context that plays a central role.⁹⁰ Austin always tries to control for the context of utterances, the circumstances, to name what exactly makes them *unhappy* and to draw the strict, unquestionable line between *happy* and *unhappy* performatives - between those which get to be analyzed and those which he decides to exclude from his analysis. Thus, as Derrida concludes, one of the most significant places in Austin's theory is occupied by the consciousness – by “[...] the conscious presence of the intention of the speaking subject in the totality of his speech act.”⁹¹ It is only the present - right here, right now - and only the conscious, both in the reference to the speaker and the receiver, that make for the successful utterance. The successful performative can happen only in the present, as a result of the conscious intentionality of the speaker and thus, as Derrida argues, “no *residue* [*reste*] escapes the present totalization” – it cannot escape for it is being rigidly controlled by the context, the consciousness and the intention.⁹² Hence, although Austin declares his separation from the philosophical tradition which tries to control for the applicability of language by limiting it solely to its descriptive function and treating words as mere instruments at the service of the subject's consciousness and intentions, according to Derrida, Austin does not manage to stay away from this tradition as much as he might wish. He tries to control and predict what can happen to language and although he is fully aware of the risk of failure, of the unforeseeable *infelicity* that the performative might turn into, he refuses to account for it. It is because *infelicities* stand for everything that the

⁸⁹ James Loxley, *Performativity*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 75

⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context” In *Limited Inc*, Trans. Alan Bass, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1982, p. 14

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

performative, as he understands it, should *not* be – the unconscious, the unintentional, the uncontrollable.

Regarding the *unhappy* performatives, *the parasites* and *the etiolations* to the ordinary, everyday use of language James Loxley, in the chapter “Speech Acts, Fiction and Deconstruction” of his *Performativity*, points out that: “If such utterances are hollow or void, then they are to be contrasted with the full or substantial utterances of ordinary language; that they should be characterized as hollow seems to make of them mere shells, shadows, or insubstantial images of the utterance proper.”⁹³ Hence, continuing along the same logic, Loxley says that those void utterances appear as mere copies or derivatives from the correct, proper performatives. This implies, as he writes, that according to Austin the ordinary speech is the original that proceeds its infelicitous *parasites*.⁹⁴ So, as Loxley argues, in this schema the *parasites* appear as quotations or citations of the “real” performatives – they derive from them, they pretend to be them but, for various reasons, they fail to do so ending up as merely their copies. But then, as Derrida asks: “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a “coded” or iterable utterance [...], if it were not then identifiable in some way as a “citation”? ”⁹⁵ According to Derrida the utterance can actually *do* something only if the formula it contains is iterable, only if it is conventional and includes certain kind of citation of an “already written script.”⁹⁶ For instance the marriage – it could not possibly be implemented if one, instead of saying “I do”, would say “I cannot sleep without my teddy bear” because referring to one’s sleeping habits is not commonly recognized as the official consensus to marriage. So if the *happy* performative is necessarily a citation then what Austin rejects as *parasitic* exactly because of its iterable character seems to be in fact just different kind of the very citation that is already included in what is assumed to

⁹³ James Loxley, *Performativity*, p. 73

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74

⁹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”, p. 18

⁹⁶ James Loxley, *Performativity*, p. 74

be the original – the *parasite* appears as necessarily incorporated in the successful performative, it is “[...] the determined modification of a general citationality [...]”⁹⁷ Therefore Derrida asks if the *etiolation* which Austin sees as a possible failure that each performative might end up with, is necessarily a failure or perhaps it is rather “[...] its internal and positive condition of possibility”, one without which any performative could never succeed?⁹⁸

Indeed, Derrida questions Austin’s belief that those *parasites* are external to language, that they happen *to* language rather than being its necessary internal part. According to Derrida, Austin builds his notion of ordinary language upon the exclusion of what in fact constitutes its crucial part and what makes the significant expression of the very workings of linguistic structures in general, of their very law.⁹⁹ Hence, as Derrida argues, any account of performative utterances must account for the (positive) possibility of failure, for this failure lies within the structure of those utterances and enables their very existence. Consequently then, Austin’s distinction between *happy* and *unhappy* performatives does not equal pure, original performatives contrasted with their derivative citations or copies but it rather stands for two different modifications of the same general rule of linguistic iterability. As Derrida concludes, the intention, the consciousness and the presence cannot possibly account for everything and the line between the *serious* and *non-serious* cannot be just unambiguously drawn, as Austin wishes to do – the *parasite* is impossible to exclude. However, Derrida does not deny the existence of the present, consciousness or intention - some marriages indeed take place. What he is trying to do instead is to point out that what is being contrasted with

⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”, p. 17

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

them, the *parasites* to the ordinary language, are in fact the necessary part of that language – “[...] they presuppose it, in an asymmetrical way, as the general space of their possibility.”¹⁰⁰

3.2 Judith’s Butler concept of performativity.

Although her concept of performativity appears in her later work as well, Judith Butler introduces it mostly in her *Gender Trouble* and then elaborates on it and clarifies some points in *Bodies That Matter*. Butler’s theory of performativity follows from her account of sex and gender, elucidating the relation between them and the way they work in the social framework. The concept of performativity serves to expose the process of gender as merely making or doing, at the same time to explain how this doing comes about. Butler’s theory of performativity has initiated great number of debates and influenced many scholars and theories, as James Loxley writes:

To say that her recasting of performativity has been influential would be to understate the case by several orders of magnitude: it has generated voluminous commentary and protracted debate, and had a huge impact on the theory and politics of identity in general as well as on an extensive range of academic disciplines.¹⁰¹

Butler’s concept of performativity also emerged in the relation to some of the feminist politics which are embedded in the identity categories for, as she acknowledges in her *Gender Trouble*, the categories of “sex” and “gender” have been crucial for the process of establishing theoretical and political frameworks for many feminist scholars and/or activists.¹⁰² But as already pointed out in the first chapter, Butler questions the efficiency of using identity categories as building blocks of feminist politics. According to her, identity categories are mere constructs of the normative social structures and hence building a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 19

¹⁰¹ James Loxley, *Performativity*, p. 113

¹⁰² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 163-4

political agenda on their basis necessarily perpetuates those structures contributing to the oppression they exercise upon individuals. Those categories do not constitute a stable or fixed point of reference, and should not be treated as one, for they are being established only through the very theories that claim to be deriving from them – the identity categories are being created and re-created at the very moment of being spoken about and this also refers to the category of woman which is so significant for feminism.

Butler's concept of performativity explains how one's sense of gender comes into existence as a result of certain bodily performances, how subjects become gendered through the cultural disciplining of their bodies that happens within the framework of heterosexual matrix. According to Butler, bodies are culturally constructed, which means that their shapes, their moves, the way in which they occupy certain spaces, it is all the normative fabrication naturalized by the social regimes. The way in which one feels about one's body, how one relates to it, does not precede one's cultural existence but it rather comes together with it, it is being shaped and performatively sustained through the normative scope of intelligibility of the heterosexualized culture. The heteronormative culture subjects bodies to the signifying practices of its norms through which those bodies gain their meaning, become validated and normalized – through which they come to matter.

While elaborating on those signifying practices, Butler mentions Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* which is an anthropological account of different meanings of, among others, dirt, taboo and purity in non-Western societies. In her book Douglas points out how the boundaries of the body are being drawn by what is culturally recognized as intelligible as well as by what culture denotes as tabooed. As she argues, through demarcating the borderlines on the surface of the bodies, culture makes distinction between what is pure and

what is dirty, between allowed and prohibited, desirable and abjected, proper and improper.

As Butler herself writes:

Her analysis, [...], provides a possible point of departure for understanding the relationship by which social taboos institute and maintain the boundaries of the body as such. Her analysis suggests that what constitutes the limit of the body is never merely material, but that the surface, the skin, is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed, the boundaries of the body become, within her analysis, the limits of the social *per se*.¹⁰³

Butler finds Douglas' analysis as enabling yet another way of thinking about the normative disciplinary practices that are exercised upon the bodies within the framework of heterosexual matrix – through the explicit marking of the bodily boundaries and tight blocking of all of its openings that could release any dirty liquids. Moreover, according to Butler all these practices are necessarily gendered, that is, the extent and the way in which one's body's surface is subjected to this cultural surveillance depends on one's situatedness within the normativity of gender binary.

However, as Butler argues, the naturalness of gender binary is also a cultural hallucination since it is only the set of acts and gestures that constitutes this naturalized effect; naturalness of gender, its stability and fixity, is performed through those very acts and gestures. Hence one's gender identity is not prior to those bodily behaviors, those behaviors do not derive from any true gendered self but they constitute it. It is only through them that the gendered self comes into being and only through them it becomes naturalized as the true-self. As Butler states: "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent it is performed. [...] gender attributes, [...], are not expressive but performative, [...] these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 167

¹⁰⁴ Judith Butler, „Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory“, in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), p. 527-528

And this exactly seems to be the main object of Judith Butler's concept of performativity – anything that can be possibly said and thought of one's gender does not express what one's gender *is*, rather it actually *does* this very gender. All acts, ways of behaving, speaking and interacting that are supposed to express one's masculinity or femininity in fact create what they claim to be revealing. Consequently then, what presents itself as fixed, stable and natural and what constitutes the point of departure for the great part of feminist politics, is in fact a mere cultural construct established and maintained through gender performances. However, importantly, to keep the illusion of its own naturalness, heteronormative gender binary needs to be performed all over again which leads to another very significant element of Judith Butler's concept of performativity – the necessity of *repetition* and *citationality*.

According to Judith Butler, not only the naturalness of gender is performative: not only is it established through the gendered performances that claim to express it, but also those performances must be continuously repeated. Since gender is a *doing* of its own authenticity - it is naturalized and normalized through it – this doing has to be kept repeated because it is at the continuous risk of failing to perform its own supposed ontology. Analogically in the case of norms, they become norms only through the repetitive performances which normalize them and through which their normative status is being established. Gender norms have to be continuously repeated by the subjects in order to establish those subjects' gender-selves and sustain them as the true ones.

To elaborate on the “nature” of those repetitions Butler uses Jacques Derrida's concept of citationality. Similarly to Derrida, she talks about citationality to challenge the differentiation between original and copy for, as she argues, the success of what presents itself as original depends on the iterable just as much as the alleged derivative does – “the

former could not succeed without participating in the citationality attributed to the latter”, and only to the latter.¹⁰⁵ Butler explains that gendered performances that appear as “real” or original are necessarily embedded in the conventional, that they come about as citations of normative and conventional formulas rather than express anyone’s voluntarist choice. Those performative repetitions are not random, one cannot just choose one’s gender and the way of expressing it because gender performances are deeply rooted in the framework of heterosexual matrix and thus are based on the conventions that derive from the normative discourses prevailing in that framework. As Butler writes:

When words engage actions or constitute themselves a kind of action, they do this not because they reflect the power of an individual’s will or intention, but because they draw upon and reengage conventions which have gained their power precisely through a *sedimented iterability*.¹⁰⁶

Gender identities are constituted through performative acts and gestures that must be repeated in order to sustain those identities and present them as “natural”. These gestures and actions do not express one’s true gendered-self but they are created only according to the normative rules of intelligibility that are at work in the heterosexualized social framework. Consequently then, the success of one’s gender performance is not the success of an individual as such, for it entirely depends on the extent to which this performance overlaps with the discourses prevailing within the framework of heterosexual matrix.

It is necessary to note at this point is that, according to Butler, obeying the rules of the matrix is compulsory because the heterosexual matrix constitutes a cultural imperative disregarding which might infrequently result in serious punitive consequences - “[...] we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right.”¹⁰⁷ The space of heterosexualized

¹⁰⁵ James Loxley, *Performativity*, p. 124

¹⁰⁶ Judith Butler, “For a Careful Reading”, in S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell, N. Frazer (eds), *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, New York, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 134

¹⁰⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 178

society makes place for two genders only and although, as Butler points out, neither the ideal of femaleness nor of maleness could be possibly ever accomplished - one needs to act as if it was already accomplished and as if it had always been.

However, Judith Butler seems to see the possible failure of performing one's gender properly as a political potential. Her theory of performativity is very closely related to her understanding of the process of social creation of identities. As I have already mentioned in the first chapter, according to Butler identity categories are built upon and expressed in the dichotomous relations to each other where the identity of x is always defined in opposition to the identity of y - as a non- y - and makes sense only as long as there is actually some y to differentiate x from. As she points out, those binaries are necessarily hierarchical which means that for someone's identity to be socially recognized and acknowledged, someone else's identity needs to be excluded. Consequently then, this exclusionary process of identity formation results in the creation of the abnormal and the improper outside where individuals who fail to perform their identities in the socially intelligible manner find themselves.

And it is exactly this very outside, according to Butler, which constitutes the promise of resisting the normalizing structures. Resistance could not possibly take place independently of those structures for, in Butlerian framework, there is nothing prior to them and/or apart from them and thus without those structures there would in fact be nothing to resist. As she writes: "The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat [...]." ¹⁰⁸ It is about, as James Loxley states, "repeating differently", about "'deviant' repetition". ¹⁰⁹ The challenge must necessarily come from within the structure, using its words but failing to speak its language.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 189

¹⁰⁹ James Loxley, *Performativity*, p. 127

Butler sees the political potential at the point where one fails to perform one's gender "properly" – this failure, according to her, constitutes a substantial possibility of exposing the whole structure with its claims of heterosexual originality, gender naturalness and sex/gender derivativeness merely as a phantasmatic construct of cultural normativity. And again, to illustrate how this could be done, Butler gives an example of drag – drag is placed on the outside of intelligibility and through and from this location challenges what is assumed to constitute the natural basis for all gender presentations. Drag reveals the contingent character of sex/gender relation by performing different gender from the one assigned at birth and by doing so, drag indeed troubles the gender, destabilizes and denaturalizes it.

In the last subsection of this chapter I will look at how Butler's argument of gender performativity together with her viewing the failure of gender performance as politically potential, apply to the social location of transgender subjectivities.

3.3 Thinking performance differently – "performing" trans.

To shortly restate my somewhat condensed presentation of the concepts of performativity as it is introduced by John Austin, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler: Austin challenges the assumption that language functions only as a description of reality, solely serving to report on facts that have actually happened. According to him, there are utterances that instead of saying something about reality, can in fact *do* something *to* it through the very process of them being. Austin separates the successful performatives, the *happy* ones, from those that result from non-serious uses of language, that are "void" or "hollow" – he calls them *parasites* or *etiolations* and decides to exclude them from his analysis of language. However, as Jacques Derrida points out, Austin excludes those *parasites* even though they

include the very iterability that in fact enables the success of any performative utterances in the first place. Consequently then, according to Derrida: “If valid or original speech acts themselves involve as essential element of citation, this citationality cannot be marked off as that which invalidates fictional performatives as non-serious.”¹¹⁰ Thereby Derrida deconstructs the Austinian distinction between the serious and non-serious speech acts exposing them both as necessarily embedded in the citationality and dependent on the iterable character of conventions they consist of.

Judith Butler in turn uses this Derridian critique of Austin and applies it to the social framework of the heterosexual matrix in order to challenge its binaries. As Butler points out, the normative logic of the original and copy that is applied to, among others, hetero/homosexual binary is a mere fabrication for the original heterosexual necessarily needs its copy to differentiate itself from as *non*-homosexual and thus to establish its own alleged originality – she concentrates on the homosexual in order to reveal the heterosexual’s strong dependency on it.

As I have already mentioned, Butler recognizes the “deviant” outside as the space of resistance that can serve to expose the “natural” inside of the heterosexual matrix as being constructed in precisely the same way as its abnormal and deviant outside supposedly is. Butler’s reflections on the political effectiveness of using identity categories in her “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, already discussed in my first chapter, could serve as one of the examples of how to productively use the excluded outside to reveal the fallacies in the logic which lays beyond this exclusion. Just to remind, according to Butler identity categories derive from and are necessarily rooted in the normativity of the heterosexualized framework which implies that any attempt of their avowal will inevitably end up with reinforcing that

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 74

exclusionary framework. She finds identity categories to be the “necessarily trouble” and thus when she herself comes out as a lesbian in her article she does it only in order to challenge it – she uses the outside space of the abjected sexual desires in order to *do* something to the whole concept of sexual desire and to its alleged heterosexual naturalness. Given the assumed originality of heterosexual identity with homosexuality perceived as its mere copy, Butler argues that identificatory practices that avow one’s sexuality derive from the heteronormative gender binary and thus necessarily perpetuate it. In Butler’s opinion there is no original but everything is a copy or imitation and therefore what she suggests instead is to dispute the very concept of authenticity by exposing heterosexuality to its own constructedness - “[...] the negative constructions of lesbianism as a fake or a bad copy can be occupied and reworked to call into question the claims of heterosexual priority”.¹¹¹ In Butler’s opinion, instead of arguing for recognition of homosexual authenticity, it is more efficient to dismiss the heteronormative accusations towards homosexuality of being a copy by pointing out its own un-reality - instead of saying “I am gay but I am just as real as you are” one should rather say “I am gay and I am not real but neither are you.”

In the following paragraphs I will examine the possible meanings of Butler’s seeing the political potential for subversion on the side of those who are already excluded, trying to explore if the meaning of her approach changes depending on the subject position in question. I am also going to think of answers to such questions as: Can everyone equally afford resisting one’s excluded position through acknowledging and embracing the very exclusion? And also, is the meaning of the act of one’s affirming one’s own performativity the same for everyone or does it change together with the different social situatedness of subjects it refers to? In my analysis I am going to focus on transgender subjectivities.

¹¹¹ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, p. 124

As I want to argue, the performance can be thought of in at least two different ways. First one concerns the meaning of performance as it is introduced by Judith Butler. The performance in Butlerian sense refers to the claim for the existence of inner, “natural” gender core which Butler tries to expose as a mere construct which is established only through the repetitive acts and behaviors, through the conventional gendered performances. Thus, in this logic, “performance” purports to say something about the social workings in general, the rules that are in effect within the social framework, trying to expose them contrary to how they manifest themselves as arbitrary norms compulsorily imposed upon individuals.

Another way of thinking about performance can be roughly defined as referring to the most ordinary everyday situations and interactions. The performance in the second sense happens on a somewhat different level. It is about, so to say, the already constructed subjects and the everyday functioning of their construction. Although I am not trying to say at all that these two are separable, I believe that stressing certain differences between them might contribute to better understanding of differences in social positioning between individuals.

As I discussed in the second chapter, individuals are always situated in some social context and within this very context they need to follow certain rules of social conduct. Their level of social intelligibility depends on the extent to which they manage to adjust to and follow those rules – if one behaves exactly as one is supposed to behave, one is recognized and acknowledged as a valid subject, a socially intelligible individual. One’s behavior is being assessed on the basis of this everyday intelligibility and even if one is aware that there is nothing natural, intrinsic or original about those behavioral patterns, it is exactly those patterns that at the end of the day constitute the point of reference for one’s everyday interactions, making them possible in the first place.

In his “Performativity and Performance/Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida’s Special Theory of Performativity” J. Hillis Miller explains this kind of performance that I am

trying to distinguish here, when he talks about “the “performances” of everyday life”, by giving the following example: “My son put on quite a performance when I tried to get him to do his homework.”¹¹² This example refers, say, to an unexpectedly intense expression of the son’s objection to do his homework, perhaps manifested in the form of screaming, yelling or crying. However, as the word “performance” might indicate, the son’s behavior was probably only for show, solely to get the mother’s attention and to make her change her mind about the homework - the tears were presumably found by her as “artificial” and not really meant. Perhaps the son was not behaving the way he usually does, it was “not really him” or he was “not really himself”, his reaction might have come rather as an unexpected since it is not a usual reaction to come from a son who is asked to do his homework.

To clarify the meaning of the everyday performance as I understand it further another example will be helpful. Imagine the situation when one interacts with someone whom one wants to impress. It is highly possible that this person would behave quite differently from the way s/he behaves with other people whom s/he does not want to impress and whom s/he feels comfortable around, perhaps very close friends – s/he might say things s/he would never say otherwise in a manner that s/he never talks. This kind of behavior may cause the following reaction in her/his close friends, supposing they are watching this interaction: “You are performing” or “You are pretending”, “You do not act like yourself”.

Coming back to Judith Butler’s suggestion of brushing off the heteronormative disparagement of homosexuality as “unreal” or a copy, with turning the logic of this disparagement around and focusing instead on the very un-reality of heterosexuality, I can hardly imagine that this logic could be used in case of my example. It takes a great effort for

¹¹² J. Hillis Miller: “Performativity as Performance/Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida’s Special Theory of Performativity,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:2, Spring 2007, p. 225

me to think of one who, in the context I drew above, reacts to those accusations with: “Yes, you are right but you are also performing”. Instead, what I find most likely to come as an answer is: “No, you are wrong. I am not performing”. This defensive reaction refers to a different level of performance than that on Butler’s understanding of the term because here it is not about defending one’s “realness” of the internal gender core or of any other kind of core for that matter. Even having recognized and acknowledged the constructedness of the self, one still might get defensive and claim that it was not a performance of any kind but it was really her/him in this situation.

As indicated, performance in this second sense is about the everyday interactions of the already constructed subjects, of how their construction manages its way through in daily situations. And the accusation of performing understood as such can perfectly be made towards a heterosexual person as well since, as I have said, it is not solely based on the general social recognition of some subjects as more authentic or “real” than other, although I believe that it is significantly affected by it. In their everyday lives individuals are assessed according to the extent to which they manage to perform their selves authentically, to which their performance is recognized as coherent and could be predicted both on the basis of their previous performances and also the general rules of performing in different situations. No one really listens or treats seriously someone whom they, for different reasons, cannot follow – someone who behaves differently every day, who seems to be acting or pretending and also, or perhaps consequently, someone whose behavior can be hardly understood within the given social framework which determines to great extent one’s capability of understanding.

Judith Butler uses the abjected space of those who are not listened and treated seriously to say something about the space of those whose performances are intelligible enough. In fact, those excluded individuals seem to function quite similarly to how Derrida sees the working of Austinian *parasites* – they are there to say something about the whole

structure, to expose it as necessarily embedded in the same un-naturalness that it wants to exclude. Clearly Butler recognizes that the “realness”, validity or social intelligibility of some subjects is taken for granted in the heterosexualized society since this is exactly her point of departure. She also recognizes that their subjectivity is built upon the refusal to acknowledge subjectivity of others – “[...] abjected beings, those who are not yet “subjects”. ”¹¹³ However, she is not really interested in questioning the status of those “abjected beings” as non-subjects as such but she rather wants to, through their non-subjectivity, point out similar inauthenticity of those who are already recognized as valid subjects.

What Butler’s account should be undoubtedly appreciated for is showing that the social positioning is very different and unequal for different subjects. Nevertheless, I would like to claim that thinking of the performance in the way that I have suggested, by revealing somewhat different level of it, enables to better see and understand those differences in subjects positions and different extents of their social intelligibility which Butler, in my opinion, fails to account for.

Those individuals who inhabit the abjected space of non-subjects are supposed to threaten the space of social intelligibility by confronting it with the fact that its alleged naturalness is not the only way for things to be. This is what happens for instance in the case of a homosexual who questions the originality and naturalness of heterosexuality. But although threatening the notion of sexuality as being always and only about the opposite-sex desire, homosexual subjects seems still to be to some extent meaningful within the normative social framework due to their sex and gender congruence.¹¹⁴

But what about transgendered subjects? – It seems, transgender subjects often do not fit this framework at all. The way the relation between their sex and gender often crosses the

¹¹³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, p. 3

¹¹⁴ And of course here I mean a cissexual homosexuals.

limits of intelligibility of the heterosexual matrix, which consequently makes their sexuality irreconcilable within this framework, make it impossible to apply the same framework in this case. Recalling what I have said before about the everyday level of performance which is assessed according to the extent to which one manages to present one-self as socially coherent and authentic, this irreconcilability renders transgender people as those who are constantly “pretending”, “performing”, “not being themselves”.

And indeed, unfortunately it is not infrequent that transgender individuals face the accusation of being fake or artificial, the accusation which implies that they behave in the manner they should not be behaving or pretend someone who they are not, exactly like in my example of the person who tries to impress someone. To see this we can apply the same test, the test of which reactions the accusation of performance a case admits of, in the present context. The political strategy Butler argues for, that is, simplifying, answering “Yes, you are right but you are also performing”, cannot possibly work here. And that is for the reason that some transgender individuals lack, and thus strive for, the necessary social grounding which is necessary for Butler’s idea to apply. Instead, the only possibility might turn out to be an answer “No, you are wrong. I am not performing”.

The crucial difference between the “impressing” performance case and the performance in the case of transgendered subjects is that the presentation of the person from the “impressing” example is being read as performance only occasionally, while in the case of transgender people, due to the strict limitations of intelligibility within the normative social framework, this might be the permanent condition of a struggle as of those who fail to secure a space from which performance or its failure is possible.. In my opinion, distinguishing between the incomparably different social situatedness of individuals is crucial in order to see how dismissing the accusation of one’s being “unreal” by turning around its very logic in

order to point out that in fact there is nothing real, might work very differently and have significantly different meanings for different individuals.

As I want to argue, it is far from the same for a cissexual person, be it a homosexual one, with a gender identity socially recognized as coherent to acknowledge and embrace their own constructedness than it is for a trans person. Because referring to the former as constructed is against the grain of social assumptions, it is like saying “No, you are all *wrong*, this person is not ‘real’ but s/he is constructed” and thus indeed might be recognized as subversive and makes sense as such. However, stating it in reference to trans person, as I believe, would rather mean “Yes, you all are *right*, this person is not ‘real’, s/he constructed”. If trans subjectivity is in fact not (yet) socially recognized, then referring to the trans person as constructed, performative, or using him/her as the perfect example of performativity in order to expose the performativity of everyone else, perpetuates and reinforces the status of trans people as of those in-between, not coherent and not stable *non-subjects*.

Recalling the focus of political activities of Erin Davis’s interviewees, if they decided to engage in any of those in the first place, it was mostly about gaining social recognition and acceptance. I think that such focus might have a lot to do with the specific social position that trans people occupy within the heterosexual matrix which is exactly the position of in-betweenes - outside of the realm of intelligibility. Due to this position transgender people strive for something quite different than subversion or destabilization of gender binary – very often they simply want to become a valid part of the society that is ruled by the binary, the part status of which they are being mostly refused.

As I have already briefly mentioned in the second chapter, subversion –as Butler understands it – seems to necessarily require occupying certain subject position that is socially intelligible, position from which one’s voice is heard and it is treated seriously.

Homosexuals can successfully constitute a social threat to heterosexuals because, as I believe, their gender identity, at least to an extent, is recognized as socially stable, what allows them to act from an intelligible position. As Iris Marion Young writes:

Homophobia is one of the deepest-held fears of difference precisely because the border between gay and straight is constructed as the most permeable; anyone at all can become gay, especially me, so the only way to defend my identity is to turn away with irrational disgust.¹¹⁵

A cissexual heterosexual man, for instance, while looking at a cissexual homosexual man sees a man with congruent sex and gender, just like him, and yet with the kind of sexuality that is not supposed to be there.

The point is that in order for subversion to have a social effect, for the act to be subversive at all, it needs to be performed from a socially intelligible position because otherwise it simply will not have any meaning in the social context. For this effect to appear, it needs to be clear what exactly it refers to, whom or/and what it is supposed to subvert or, simply, what it means. If this is true that transgender people's subjectivity is not yet recognized as valid and intelligible, then the question of subversion does not arise for them, at least not in the way that Butler suggests and understands it. Thus, if a homosexual in fact manages to challenge the alleged naturalness of heterosexuality, it is because within the heteronormative frame of intelligibility males (or females) *should* not be this way. However, given what has been said about the social situatedness of transgender individuals, in this social framework they rather *can't* be this way which refers to the unintelligibility and hence impossibility of their existence.

Having said that, once again I want to underline the way the usefulness of Butler's concepts for transgender subjects comes into question. Using transgender people to reveal the

¹¹⁵ Iris Marion Young, „Abjection and Oppression: Dynamics of Unconscious Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia”, in Arleen B. Dallery, Charles E. Scott, *Crises in Continental Philosophy*, SUNY Press, Albany 1990, p. 209

constructedness and performativity of gender binary through their own inauthenticity and thus making them perfect examples of subversion, in my opinion, fails to account for the specificity of their subject positions. It locates trans people in relation to gender binary which they often *are not recognized* as part of. I believe that applying the concepts of constructedness, subversion and performativity to the trans contexts drastically changes the meaning of those concepts. Because those concepts, understood the way Butler understand them, in the very specific relation to gender binary, do not make sense in the social context of transgender people – they are not part of their story yet and thus they simply do not apply to them.

Conclusion

In my thesis I was looking at the relation between queer theory and transgender subjectivity. Since the figure of transgender frequently serves to support the queer point concerning sex/gender incongruity or gender performativity I am trying to examine this relation in detail looking closer at the queer representations of transgender subjects. While looking at queer theory, I mostly focus on Judith Butler's theoretical account of sex and gender and its usefulness for trans contexts. And although I am far from saying that this is all that queer theory is about, given the topic of my thesis, I have chosen to focus on Judith Butler due to the fact that gender, which constitutes the focus of her theory, is of a great importance for trans people.

As I argue, queer theory, while talking about transgender subjects, fails to account for the specificity of their subject positions and to see them as located in the bigger picture of the social requirement for intelligibility. I believe that the queer subversion of the gender binary, possibility of which is often illustrated through the example of trans, can only be done from a certain social position which must necessarily be already recognized and acknowledged as valid and intelligible - the position which trans people are often denied. Thus it appears that transgender individuals are assumed to be challenging the gender binary which they are often not yet recognized as being a part of. At the same time, their explicit desire to be recognized as "real" women or men is identified, as I argue erroneously, as the perpetuation of normative social framework. This error derives from (mis)-accounting for trans contexts by reading trans narratives through the subversive/normative dichotomy and assuming that they can be read through it in the first place. I believe that, as Erin Davis suggests, this dichotomy is false and results from placing on trans individuals an expectation to challenge the gender binary. I am convinced that this expectation fails to accurately see the social positioning of trans

people and the fact that they often simply cannot afford crossing the binary the way Butler understands it. But I also think that focusing solely on the subversion of the gender binary overlooks the desires of the very subjects in question for some of them precisely do not want to subvert this binary but they rather strive for the recognition within it. Thus using trans people as an example of gender destabilization in fact perpetuates the very image of them that they try to escape – the image that depicts them as those who are always in-between.

Judith Butler uses the drag example in order to say something about the general structure of the heterosexual matrix and to reveal the assumptions concerning its workings as mere fictional cultural constructs. However, as I argue, transgender people are assumed to be saying something about the very social matrix which they themselves are often not recognized as being a part of. No matter if one is aware of one's constructedness or not, one necessarily needs to occupy a certain socially intelligible position in order to be recognized as a valid subject and be treated as such. Transgender people, due to the relation between their own sex and gender, often cross the limits of intelligibility within the heterosexualized social framework. If this is true, then placing trans subjects as an example of gender performativity or its constructedness reinforces their location beyond the social intelligibility, the location which is extremely vulnerable to violence for, as Butler herself writes, the society punishes those who fail to perform their gender properly.

In my thesis I tried to question the usefulness of certain queer theory's accounts, including Judith Butler's, for the social location of trans subjectivities. My point was to indicate that, although queer theory talks about transgender subjects, it fails to account for their particular social situatedness. While using them to support its own claims and to challenge the gender binary, what is overlooked is not only the fact that trans people are often

not recognized as its legitimate part yet, but also the fact that they might desire, instead of subverting gender binary, to actually become a part of it.

As I have already mentioned in the introduction, this thesis is also very personal for me in terms of my own development of knowledge about the topic in question. During my research as well as during the very process of writing it, I have learnt a great deal but also many new questions arose. I have realized how much more could be done, how many more significant issues, that I did not have time and space for, could be covered here. One of those issues is perhaps the analysis of transgender subjectivity from a material perspective. This could be significant both as analyzed together with queer or Butler's account but also as a completely separate topic. Former, because the issue of materiality in Butler's theory causes some quite animated discussions and latter, because trans people are infrequently thought of as perceiving their bodies as fixed. I believe that this could be further discussed from the perspective of new materialism offering new account of trans relation to materiality, other than seeing it as necessarily fixed, static and essential.

References

- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . 'For a Careful Reading'. In *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, edited by Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser. New York, London: Routledge, 1995.
- . 'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler', Interview by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal. *Radical Philosophy* 67 (Summer 1994).
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- . 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination'. In *The Judith Butler Reader*, edited by Sarah Salih and Judith Butler. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004.
- . 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory'. *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988).
- Davis, Erin Calhoun. 'Situating "Fluidity": (Trans) Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity'. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 1 (2009).
- Derrida, Jacques. 'Signature, Event, Context'. In *Limited Inc*, translated by Alan Bass. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1982.
- Elliot, Patricia. 'Engaging Trans Debates on Gender Variance: A Feminist Analysis'. *Sexualities* 12, no. 5 (2009).
- Gamson, Joshua. 'Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma'. *Social Problems* 42, no. 3 (August 1995): 390–407.
- Hird, Myra J. 'For a Sociology of Transsexualism'. *Sociology* 36, no. 3 (August 2002).
- Lane, Riki. 'Transitional Stories: Constructing Biology and Culture in a Transgender Clinic'. In *TASA 2007 Conference Proceedings*, 2007.
<http://www.tasa.org.au/conferences/conferencepapers07/papers/100.pdf>.
- Loxley, James. *Performativity*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- McIntosh, Mary. 'Review of Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity by Judith Butler'. *Feminist Review* 38 (Summer 1991).
- Miller, J. Hillis. 'Performativity as Performance/Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida's

- Special Theory of Performativity'. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (Spring 2007).
- Nagoshi, Julie L., and Stephan/ie Brzuz. 'Transgender Theory: Embodying Research and Practice'. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* Vol. 25, no. 4 (2010).
- Namaste, Viviane. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgender People*. Chicago, IL and London: Chicago University Press, 2000.
- . 'Undoing Theory: The "Transgender Question" and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo American Feminist Theory'. *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2009).
- Prosser, Jay. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Seidman, Steven. 'Identity and Politics in a "Postmodern" Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes'. In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Seal Press, 2007.
- Stone, Alison. *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.
- Stryker, Susan, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore. 'Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?' *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2008).
- Warner, Michael. *Fear Of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Young, Iris Marion. 'Abjection and Oppression: Dynamics of Unconscious Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia'. In *Crises in Continental Philosophy*, edited by Arleen B. Dallery and Charles E. Scott. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.