Performativity of Gender: Queer Theory and New Understandings of Gender and Subversion in
Popular Music Performance from Takarazuka to “Riot Grrrl”
“All women everywhere are oppressed,” was one of the main focuses of feminism up until the late 20th century. It was certainly central to Sherry Ortner’s feminist theories. (1974) The 1980s saw radical reconstitution and deconstruction of feminism and its apparent subjects. We came to understand feminisms rather than feminism. The stark solidarity of the aforementioned statement became “all women everywhere are oppressed, but differently.” While women were still women, an encompassing grouping of female bodies globally (in theory), oppression became contingent on many aspects of life such as race, class, religion, and location. The focus on difference and intersectionality spoke largely to the rise in post-modernism and post-structuralism in academia. (Maynard, 2001) Post-structuralism further invited the start of queer theory, a critical approach to the study of gender and sexuality focused on improving the understanding of previously unchallenged identity categories and binaries such as heterosexuality/homosexuality and man/woman. The influence of queer theory on “all women everywhere are oppressed,” rather than utilizing the politics of difference, questions the very understanding of the meaning of “women.” In the opening of Judith Butler’s seminal work, Gender Theory, she criticizes the assumption of “women” as the initiators of feminist interests in discourse as well as the subject of the political project of feminism. (Butler, 1990: 2)

The grounds for Butler’s radical inquisition of the subject in feminist theory is the assumption that the identity of “women” exists, in any way, as a truth or authentic identity. Rather, one of Butler’s central points of queer theory is the deconstruction of gender, both of the binary structure and mythology of authentic identity. Butler’s project of demystifying and denaturalizing the concepts of gender are built on the notions of gender as a performative construction of culture. Gender performativity has reformed the many ways we think about gender and has been utilized across many academic disciplines, including cultural criticism. One
form of cultural criticism, the academic critique of popular music, has utilized Butler’s theory of performativity to provide greater nuanced readings of musical performance and gender subversion, revealing the complex webs of power that restrain and empower certain forms of performance. The multiplicity of webs surround the gender subversion and performance are centered on means of drag, androgyny, parody, ambivalence, and reception. Butler’s new language of gender performativity influenced how we conceive of a performance as subversion, particularly the ambivalence that limits subversive power. Of particular interest are the ways that academics have applied Butler’s theory of gender performativity into the world of Takarazuka and the world of “women in rock (music).”

One of Butler’s first engagements with the creation of the performativity of gender is in her 1988 paper, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” In the paper she sketches a phenomenological background of gender so as to discuss the constitution of gender through repeated mundane acts. One theoretical ground she operates from is Beauvoir’s claim, “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman.” (Quoted in Butler, 1988: 519) The importance of “becoming,” of “being,” is highlighted as central to Butler’s theoretical approach to gender and sexuality. (Queer Theory and Gender Performativity, 2009) Essentially, Butler’s choosing to interpret Beauvoir’s claim as a performative act, where the act constitutes the identity. This forms the basis for Butler’s conception of gender, whereby gender becomes constituted through repetition of stylized acts. (1988: 520) As the constitution of gender relies on acts to establish gender, Butler argues that it cannot be a “substantial model of identity.” (1988: 520) Here we see just why she questions the existence of a universal subject of feminist discourse as “women” is not a universal category but a “social temporality.” In this conception of gender, there is no preceding subject, no “self” outside of discourse. Thus all bodies are gendered, and our existence
depends on perpetuating the correct acts that gender us. (Butler, 1988: 522) The reason gender depends on the repetition of uniformed acts is due to the anxiety of the unconscious recognition of the fallacy of gender as an identity. (Butler, 1988: 528) The fallacy is obscured by the notion of acts as expressive, which signifies acts as expressing rather than constructing gender. Thereby, we communicate our gender identity by expressive acts. (Butler, 1988: 528) However, as Butler argues that gender is performative and not expressive, there can be no pre-existing identity or “true or false, real or distorted acts of gender.” (1988: 528) The performative nature of gender then determines that from the perception of a body it is gendered, which in turn requires the gendered body to correctly perform the acts associated with its gender.

With the firm theoretical grounding of performativity, Butler connects performativity into the realm of agency and politics. By taking the feminist position of the personal as political, Butler illustrates how the expansion of political into the personal opens up the possible for varied acts as well. (1988: 523) Thus there becomes acts that are “done” with specific goals in mind as well as acts “in and of themselves, apart from any instrumental consequence, that challenge the category of women itself.” (Butler, 1988: 523) Through this construction we come to under acts of subversion either through deliberate acts of interference based on knowledge or as the simple effects of an unconsidered action. When discussing the transvestite, Butler establishes her approach later replicated and developed in Bodies that Matter. The transvestite’s gender, despite appearing as possible “parody” is as real as any other form of gender performance. (Butler, 1988: 527) The transvestite or drag queen are agents acting out a contradictory performance of gender that demystifies the notions of fixed or natural gender. Since gender is performative, each of us has the agency to perform acts, intentional or otherwise, that seek to combat the repressive and
re-establishing project of gender. However, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler analyzes the
ambivalence of acts of drag performance.

In Jennifer Robertson’s ethnography of the all-female Takarazuka revue in Japan, she
relies heavily on the Butler’s theories of performativity and ambivalence. The revue is a form of
popular theater dating back to the early 20th century, which features only women actors
performing both female (musumeyaku – daughter role player) and male (otokoyaku – male role
player) roles. Robertson’s chapter “Staging Androgyny” directly confronts the ambivalence
inherent in drag or cross-gendered performances on stage. The androgyny of the otokoyaku
produces an ambivalent relationship in regards to her of male gender. Robertson recalls Butler
for her theory of androgyny as a bodily act that subverts and retains the dichotomy of
performance comes down to multiple levels of intention and accident, of controllable and
uncontrollable elements. The men who run, produce, and perpetuate the Takarazuka stage
control the public image and text of the revue, but the audience controls the ultimate reception.
As Robertson highlights, the intention of Takarazuka producers was unsuccessfully
communicated to both fans and government officials. (1998: 86) However, between the
government and fans, who both received similar readings of the revue, the fans of Takarazuka
constructed their reception of Takarazuka in opposition to government and patriarchy. They
viewed the otokoyaku is signifying radically different performance of both masculinity and
femininity, like a lesbian fashion trendsetter or feminist icon. (Robertson, 1998: 86)

Robertson presentation of the ambivalence created through production and reception of
the otokoyaku then comes in direct engagement with Butler’s theory of performativity. The
otokoyaku performs the expected gender acts as established by the pre-existing roles they inherit.
These acts are arguably not activist in nature, not a formal intentional act of interrogating genders. Instead it is an act that depends on the interpretation and reception of the audience. Thus, through Butler’s theory of the personal as political, which extends acts done outside of political intention, the otokoyaku represents the possible reading of gender subversion through the reception. The fans receive and construct the otokoyaku from their own preferred reading of gender and/or sexuality in the ways they most prefer. However, one particular thread in Butler’s theory of performativity in drag performances, is absent in Robertson’s analysis, but similarly present in a subtext of Robertson’s positioning of ambivalence and androgyny.

Butler clarifies her position on drag she presents in *Gender Trouble* in her chapter “Paris is Burning” in *Bodies that Matter*. She simply states, “there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion.” (1993: 85) She continues, pointing out drag, “at best,” is a site of ambivalence which reveals the “regimes of power” that construct gender, but is also limited a drag only exists in those “regimes of power.” (Butler, 1993: 85) Rather than leaving drag as an ambivalent performance of gendered acts, Butler pushes drag into the realm of all performances. Much like how she described the transvestite’s gender as equivalent of anyone else’s performance of gender, drag becomes the symbolic describer of all gender performances. We are all, in effect, doing drag. It is in this effect, that Butler acknowledges the subversive possibilities of drag, insomuch that drag reveals and parodies gender construction. Not only does drag parody the notion of gender as a stable identity, but it also parodies the necessity of performing specific bodily acts in order to craft our gender. Ambivalence remains as drag can be employed both in support of the systems of power controlling gender and in the revelatory acts of gender. As a philosopher and activist, Butler’s focus is on the “reality” of performative, whereby drag’s subversive potentiality is spoilt by the required use of the same acts that constitute the dichotomy
of gender binaries. Drag performances are interpreted and judged on scale with its relationship to a typicalized concept of either male or female. However, there is also the politics of reception that Robertson highlights in the fan relationship to the otokoyaku. Thereby, the varied constructive and receptive interpretation of female drag performance in Takarazuka is dependent more on the fans then the performer. The androgyny that marks otokoyaku performers disrupts any hegemonic or typical reading by opening up possibilities and multiplicities of meaning where fans can utilize in intentional acts. In essence, I am suggesting that Robertson’s construction of androgynous ambivalence allows for intentional acts of subversion by the fan’s reception of the otokoyaku’s unintentional acts. Ambivalence and drag represent the potential for subtextual subversion in the reception rather than the initial acts performed, which allow for drag to exist in mainstream consciousness in a ubiquitous position navigating between hegemony and subversion.

If the ambivalence empowers and limits the subversive potential of drag, then, from the perspective of gender performance, how can we “do” gender subversively? One thread of popular music criticism has analyzed the growth of women in rock as particular damaging the patriarchal order of gender. Through the harsh screamed vocals and dirty guitar riffs, women performing in the spheres of rock have succeeded in appropriating the acts associated with the genre. The question, however, is what part of music performance is music and which part is gender, and then which subverts. In Butler’s 1988 article, she describes the intersection of theatrical and social, of the real and the unreal, as complicated, with “social” and “real” performances “governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions” and the “theatrical” and “unreal” can only be censored or criticized. (1988: 527) In this dichotomy between “theatrical” and “social,” if they exist in concise separation, music performance, the role
of music forms and communication, is theatrical, while the gender performance of a performer is “social.” This appears to be the only method of understanding the relationship gender performativity, genre, and subversion as offered by Marion Leonard. In “Strategies of Performance” from Leonard’s *Gender in the Music Industry* she first establishes a discourse of performance and subversion before, largely, dismantling the subversive potential of female rock performance. Her discussion is filed along the line of “doing” gender versus “doing” genre. Thereby, Leonard replicates a level of ambivalence in indie rock, which had previously been hailed as a genre of resistance.

In some ways, genre and gender are the same. We can understand them both in the same terms that genre and gender are constructed by acts overtime and portrayed as stable identities so as to hide the mythically created fallacy. Genre, in essence, is just as performative as gender. Leonard’s contention is “the equation of screamed rock vocals by female rock artists with ‘female rage’ is a problematic interpretation as it veers into essentialism.” (2007: 97) Presuming that the female artist is “doing” gender, rather than “genre,” constructs the performance as “social” despite the “theatrical” location of performance. The politics of subversion are further interrogated by Leonard on the grounds of intent and effect. She highlights, by way of Elizabeth Wilson, that subversion alone is merely posturing, which in music is usually a strategy of marketing. (Leonard, 2007: 95) The commoditization of subversion by bands such as the Rolling Stones, has created a music culture that is largely distinguishing of potential performative transgressions. Within the frame of subversion as commodity the intention of the act is based in a marketing strategy, which is why Leonard questions the reality of all female performers of rock as “doing” gender.
On this ground, we can discuss the ambivalence of gender in the realm of music/genre performativity as depending the necessities of specific conventions of genre. When Kim Gordon sings or PJ Harvey screeches, are they playing to an innate feminine rage or the expected vocal performance of their genre? (Leonard, 2007: 97) As I discussed in relation to the politics of reception, a thread that Leonard ultimately avoids, preferring to focus on performative intentions and privileging the performer before the audience, allows for readings to be constructed from different subject positions. The ultimate location of meaning comes not from performer, not from academics, but from fans. A majority of musical performers not only perform ambivalence, but, I believe, due so intentionally. Ambivalence allows for a performer to attract multiple discursive approaches and gender performance is instilled within that method. For example, in referring to Mick Jagger’s performative sexuality with the Rolling Stones, Sheila Whiteley states, “Jagger provides a space for alternative sexual definitions and an openness to sexuality…” (1997: 75) Jagger attracts both attention as a heterosexualized and homosexualized object of desire, a performative attribute of David Bowie as well, and, admittedly, muddled by the commoditization of their performance. Their performances are inauthentic insomuch the performance worked as a strategy to cement a marketable identity and commercial musician. This frame is extendable to women in rock who are deliberately subversive for commercial purposes, but through reception, where the fans and the audience receive different messages, cannot their performances of gender, within the recognition of their acts as part of their genre performance, be interpreted of subversion? Despite Leonard’s extensive strategy of destabilizing the subversive potential I think even she would agree that gender subversion through even genre convention is achievable, so long as we recognize that subversion ultimately does nothing without a back politic. (2007: 95)
A total political context to gender subversion is what “riot grrrl” offered their limited audience. As a movement that unified the indie punk rock scene with the rise of third-wave feminism, Leonard, and others, have looked at the performativity of the scene as subversive. While drag depends on the context of the performance, who is performing what for whom, and women in indie rock are caught in an ambivalent web of gender performance, genre performance, and commercial identities, “riot grrrl” developed a whole subcultural image that replicated their politics through their music, their performance, and their connection with fans and activism through production of “zines.” Rather than delving into music analysis, I will construct my focus on the unification of academic discourses on the politicization of bodies within the movement, a site where I see Butler’s theory of performativity and the subversion of gender more explicitly. While there is little discussion over whether Butler’s theories exerted direct influence on the “riot grrrl movement,” the temporal trajectory of the “riot grrrl movement” that suggests the possibility. Kaltefleiter remarks that “riot grrrl” “draws upon feminist theories of gender ideology.” (2009: 233) Bikini Kill, Excuse 17, and Heavens to Besty, all regarded as influential groups in forming the body of work now described and named as “riot grrrl” grew out of college students at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington where the founding members such as Corin Tucker, Carrie Brownstein, and Kathleen Hanna would have been possibly been exposed to Butler in courses. This is further suggested on Le Tigre’s¹ website that lists Gender Trouble under the heading of “What is Feminism?”

The body politics of Hanna’s performance are constantly highlighted for her direct confrontation of many different levels of gender, power, and patriarchy. Perhaps the most commonly addressed is how Hanna would scrawl out female pejoratives such as “whore” and

¹ Post-Bikini Kill group with Kathleen Hanna.
“slut” on her body. (Leonard, 2007: 121) In essence, Hanna would adorn her body with the terminology used against women and also applied to particularly icons of radically feminist emancipation. (Attwood, 2007: 244) The performance worked to reveal and mirror the common slurs that were already there. This strategy of reappropriation of slurs is mirrored in the trajectory of “queer” as a pejorative for non-heteronormative identities, but is now seen as an empowering site of solidarity in activism and academia. Hanna, and other performers, were engaging in a radical form of performative body politics. The bra-burning of second-wave feminism had changed.

“… resisting patriarchal domination of the female body is not a matter of wiping off make-up and stepping out of thongs and high heels. If our gender is radically socially constructed, then these are no more inherently oppressive than unshaven legs and bralessness are liberatory. The mandate, then, is not to embody an alternative gender script, but to resist all scripts, which can be accomplished by donning the body markings… of an alternative gender, or by combing those of multiple genders in playful or ironic ways.”

(McCarthy, 2006: 72 [my emphasis])

McCarthy’s description of how concepts of resistance changed which Butler, which she highlights, almost jokingly, just after. The radical politics of performativity within the “riot grrrl” scene is purely built on the playful and ironic ways in which Hanna, and other “grrrls,” “do” on stage, self-identifying, not simply as “grrrl,” but as the wide range of social criticism placed on their “poor” performance of “femininity.” There is no subtext to their performance, no alternative meanings constructed through politics of reception. Music performance is a tool, just as the internet and zines served as integral methods of communication and solidarity in the third-wave, for these radical feminists to communicate a politics of female solidarity in a period where
the concept of “women” was challenged. (Garrison, 2000) Bikini Kill and the other groups demonstrated a method of gender performance to empower and destabilize gender, which was now possible, primarily, through Butler’s denaturalization of gender.

The denaturalization of gender within queer theory discourses of Judith Butler has changed not only how we think about gender, but also the methods and strategies associated with combating masculinist privilege. As highlighted by McCarthy, the politics of disrobing markers of femininity ceased to be a source for organized revolt. Simply moving from an “identity” constructed by high heels and thongs to bralessness and unshaven legs, while potentially empowering, did nothing to reveal the project of gender constitution. The inherent gendering of bodies, the understanding that from perception the body is gendered as male or female, means that to actually address the issues of gender and patriarchal power we need individual rather than collective resistance. By refusing to “do” woman or man, we have the individual capability of revealing the constructive process of gender and destabilizing the myth of the fallacy of stable gender. Drag, which once could be considered as the prime performance of subversion, was successfully problematized in both Robertson’s account of Takarazuka and Butler’s analysis of *Paris is Burning*. If all gender is performative, then there really is no difference between the performance of gender and the drag performer because all ways of “doing” gender rely on drag. Thus, the ambivalent nature of drag performance allows partial resistance while also relying on the systems of power that drag intends to subvert. In similar ways, Leonard’s analysis of the indie rock scene, the academic and critical engendering of conventional genre based acts, is potentially damaging to the female performer as it forces the female rock musician to be “doing” gender resistance even if she is not. The politics of reception, by which both drag and female rock performers are witnessed by the audience, helps grant some level of subversion, as the
multiplicities of interpretations of the ambivalence of the performance. Through the “riot grrrl” scene, we can directly see how these new understandings of gender are produced in unification between feminist discourse, activism, and popular music performance. Resistance is found and intentional because of the greater context, but is also marked and reified as a particularly limiting expression of subversion, one that was co-opted in commercialized production of “girl power” in groups such as Spice Girls. In essence, Butler’s theory of gender performativity has leached into both academic discourse of women in popular music as well as the performances themselves, all of which suffer from a layer of ambivalence due to either the problematized nature of the gender binary or the limiting, exclusionary radical politics. Nevertheless, gender as performative has provided new politics and resistance possibilities within the field of music performance and study where the responsibility is placed on individual acts rather than a collective identity.

**Bibliography**


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