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ON THE SUBJECT OF PERFORMATIVITY
Judith Butler’s influence in geography

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Introduction
Since its articulation in 1988, Judith Butler’s concept of performativity has been employed, critiqued and transformed by scholars in countless fields. Feminist geographers continue to explore the term’s potentials and limitations for theoretical, methodological and empirical applications in diverse modes of geographic scholarship. This chapter charts the development of performativity and its uptake in geographic scholarship, with particular attention to the theorization of the subject in these applications. We begin with a summary of performativity in Butler’s early work, before turning to geographic critiques and applications and, finally, to future directions for geographic inquiry. Throughout this discussion, we endeavour to keep geographic debates in conversation with Butler’s evolving work on performativity, as it continues to provide direction in ongoing debates.

Philosophical foundations of performativity
Butler first articulates a performative theory of gender in ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’ (1988). Against then-common understandings of gender as an internal essence linked to biological sex, Butler argues that gender is a discursive production and ‘must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding and gendered self’ (1988, 519) by way of repetition and sedimentation. Instead of a stable, sexed self ‘expressing’ gender as an internal truth, Butler considers how various acts, comportments and discourses of the body actually produce the subject that they supposedly reveal. Rather than naming a gendered subject that pre-exists its constitution in language, discourse performatively produces this subject.

Butler further elaborates this argument in Gender Trouble (1990), clarifying the implications of gender performativity. She describes how ‘the gendered body . . . has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’ (1990, 185). Thus ‘gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed’ (1990, 34). This doing
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relies on the citation, or repetition, of norms and previous conventions, but may also break with these norms, given the possibility for slippage or parody to reinscribe their historical meanings.

In her next major work, *Bodies that Matter* (1993), it is clear that Butler is responding to critiques of *Gender Trouble*, which was read as being overly reliant on the analysis of the operations of discourse, at the expense of attending to the embodied practices of concrete subjects (see 1993, viii–xxiv). In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler attempts to further clarify the role of discourse in her argument:

> to claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body.  

1993, xix

*Bodies that Matter*, then, is concerned with illuminating the ways in which the ‘materiality’ of the body (i.e. the category of sex) is nonetheless inscribed with cultural meanings that actually mobilize and (re)produce the distinction between the material and the discursive that is at stake in these discussions.

Butler’s concept of gender performativity has wide-ranging implications for how we think about issues of subjectivity and agency in relation to gender and other discourses. In her critique of the sovereign subject and voluntaristic notions of agency, Butler argues that we cannot imagine a subject outside of discourses of gender, as gender is one of the terms in which we recognize ourselves and others and become intelligible subjects in the first place. Gender is an ‘enabling cultural condition’ that provides the terms through which we might articulate an intention or desire as ‘our own’ (1993, xvii). Quoting Derrida, Butler describes: ‘in such a typology, the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance’ (qtd. in 1993, xxi).

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler thus gestures toward the idea that agency and intention must be understood as situated within the limits of recognition and cultural intelligibility, as constrained and enabled by existing meanings and practices (e.g. those of determining and investing ‘sex’ with meaning and material consequence) rather than as a property of an individual. At times, Butler’s own slippages and incomplete distinctions between performativity and performance, reliant on an ascription of intention and self-consciousness to the latter, have made her interventions less than perfectly clear.

Butler continued to engage with these questions of power, agency and subjectivity throughout the 1990s. In her most theoretically explicit discussion of performativity, *Excitable Speech* (1997), Butler elaborates upon the relationship between the body, speech, identity and agency. She again emphasizes that an attention to the linguistic does not occlude the body: ‘if we consider that the *habitus* operates according to a performativity, then it would appear that the theoretical distinction between the social and the linguistic is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain’ (1997, 153). Here, she takes up the issue of hate speech to consider how speech can cause bodily harm to others, demonstrating how speech constitutes a bodily act and how the linguistic and social cannot be separated.

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler also elaborates upon the performative power of discourse to produce the subjects that it names. She explains how one’s interpellation by language (even when it constitutes misrecognition or harm) constitutes the founding of oneself as a named and speaking subject, establishing the conditions of possibility to redeploy and re-appropriate discourses. Butler describes:
The paradox of subjectivation is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or re-articulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.

Excitable Speech, then, clarifies the necessity of a significant focus on language in Butler’s account, in that the intersubjective linguistic realm must be seen as the conditions of possibility and, simultaneously, the historical limitations, of one’s agency as a (non-sovereign) speaking subject. ‘Whereas some critics mistake the critique of sovereignty for the demolition of agency,’ Butler explains, ‘I propose that agency begins where sovereignty wanes’ (1997, 16).

These provocative and challenging interventions into issues of gender, the subject and agency have excited and puzzled scholars attempting to employ Butler’s work in geographic research. Many of the aforementioned tensions in Butler’s articulation – particularly as they concern the subject, body and agency – are highlighted and negotiated in subsequent applications by feminist and other geographers.

The next section presents geographic critiques of performativity and surveys the ways in which performativity has been used in geography. The questions posed here – the problem of the subject and agency – do not disappear, but continue to shape and trouble inquiries into the intersections of subjectivity, space and meaning.

Performativity in geography: space and the subject of performativity

As Butler’s concept of performativity became widely circulated and debated throughout the 1990s, scholars began to explore its potential uses and limitations within particular disciplines. For feminist geographers concerned with the production of identity, discourse and social power, performativity offered a powerful new way to think about these processes. The concept, however, also presented stumbling blocks, as Butler’s articulation did not speak much to the importance of space, place or other matters of concern to geographers.

In an early critique of performativity and its engagement by geographers, one of us – Nelson (1999) – raises concerns that geographers at that time relied exclusively on Gender Trouble and Bodies that Matter to theorize performativity, leaving most with an ‘abstracted’ subject and few ways to account for how historically and geographically concrete subjects, individually or collectively, might consciously navigate, resist or re-signify hegemonic norms. In these two early works, Nelson and others (see Magnus 2006; McNay 1999) take issue with Butler’s formulation of resistance as the re-signification of dominant discourses, which seems to occur solely through ‘accidental slippages’ by unwitting subjects within an otherwise ‘compelled repetition’ of norms (Nelson 1999). Thus, for Nelson, ‘[w]ithout a critical reworking, Butler’s notion of performativity actually undermines attempts to imagine a historically and geographically concrete subject that is constituted by dominant discourses, but is potentially able to reflect upon and actively negotiate, appropriate or resist them’ (1999, 332).

Nelson’s critique also draws attention to the paradoxical manner in which geographers working with performativity were sidestepping the issue of the subject, often by assuming a voluntaristic subject at odds with Butler’s formulation. An early attempt to apply performative thinking to gendered and sexed space by Bell et al. (1994) has been critiqued by both Nelson (1999, 2014) and Lloyd (1999) for overemphasizing a voluntaristic subject without attending to the concrete contexts in which identities become expressed and read. This points to larger
issues at play in formulations and applications of performativity; for Lloyd, ‘[w]hat is occluded … is the space within which performance occurs, the others involved in or implicated by the production, and how they receive and interpret what they see’ (1999, 210). Here, both authors emphasize problems and ambiguities in Butler’s formulation, how these issues are amplified in subsequent applications and the need to take seriously the geographic specificity in which meanings are performed and produced.

Despite these concerns, Butler’s concept of performativity has been widely engaged in a range of geographical scholarship because it provides powerful ways to conceptualize the embodied and continual re-enactment of identity by a subject constituted by – not separate from – wider power relations and discourses. In bringing performativity into geographic debates, both the subject matter of performativity has shifted (from gender to a larger consideration of space and social relations) and the philosophical ‘subject’ of performativity has been revised with a finer attention to how space and the subject are performatively co-constituted. As Gregson and Rose argue, ‘a notion of performance is indeed crucial for a critical human geography concerned to understand the construction of social identity, social difference, and social power relations, and the way space might articulate all of these’ (2000, 38). Further, they suggest, ‘[s]pace too needs to be thought of as brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power’ (2000, 38).

Keeping these theoretical debates and interventions in mind, we now turn to a survey of applications of performativity in geography. Given the diversity of geographic approaches to thinking performatively, we thematize this work into three broad domains: critical identity; political geography; and economic geography. This survey is certainly not exhaustive, but we hope it will give some indication of the ways in which geographers are utilizing the concept of performativity and suggest some directions for future work.

Geographers engaging issues of identity, social space and power (notably feminist geographers) have employed performativity closest to its original foundations (i.e. as a critique of identity formation and subjectivity), yet have elaborated upon the geographic meanings of the concept to connect processes of subject formation to specific sites and spaces. Geographers of space and sexuality have used performativity to think through the co-constitution of space, normativities, sexual identities and practices (see contributions to Bell and Valentine 1995). Other scholars have employed the term in reference to masculinities (Barber 2015); beauty, race and place (Tate 2013); labour and gender identity (McDowell 1995; Secor 2003); and racial identity and sexual identity in particular spaces (Thomas 2004, 2005). As pointed out by Nelson (2014), these critiques of identity formation and subjectivity struggle to varying extents with the tensions present in Butler’s original account by either overemphasizing the power of discourse and leaving little room for agency and resistance or by mistakenly importing a voluntaristic subject into their arguments. A closer empirical and theoretical attention to subjectivity as relational and located within spatial and place-based relations and meanings may help resolve some of these issues in future work.

Political geographers have employed performativity to consider how political identities, spaces and ideas are performatively co-constituted; that is, how political identities, practices and institutions are continually (re)articulated within specific struggles for political, representational and social space. Political geographers have applied performative thinking to private/public space (Sullivan 2016); electoral politics (Schurr 2013); nationality (Benwell 2014); citizenship and borders (Kaiser 2014); property and cartography (Blomley 2014); regionalism and development (Glass 2014); environmental governance (Cohen and Harris 2014); scale (Cohen and Harris 2014; Kaiser and Nikiforova 2008); and urban (re)development (Rose–Redwood 2014), among many other topics. For political geographers, then, the ‘subject of performativity’
is rather expansive; rather than focus exclusively on the production of gendered and sexed subjects through norms, they are more concerned with how discourses, representations and other political processes across scale define and, in doing so, call into being particular spaces and conceptions of the political. Treatments of resistance and contestation in these accounts provide various opportunities for thinking through issues of agency and intention within larger socio-spatial and political realms. While these developments toward notions of political performativity present interesting opportunities to engage the concept, it is important to note that these reworkings have often elided the importance of thinking about sex and gender, reinscribing sexless and genderless bodies as the subjects of political performativity.

Similarly, economic geographers have expanded the referent of performativity to think about the performative elements of economic discourses, practices and institutions. In doing so, they have urged against a simplistic and taken-for-granted approach to economies, pointing to how specific practices of exchange, representation and institutionalization performatively enact economies at various scales. Feminist economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham have argued that totalizing discourses of global capitalism erase the diversity of economic forms and unevenness of capitalist ‘penetration’ and invisibilize already-existing alternatives to capitalist economies (2008). Similarly, Steinfort, Hendriksen and Pijpers (2017) consider ‘communal performativity’ as a means of resisting neoliberalism. Others have used innovative methodologies, like actor-network theory, to attend to the specific relations and processes that make economies what they are (Berndt and Boeckler 2009; Callon 2007). Here, we see the terms of performativity intersecting with concepts and methodologies of practice, leading to a redefinition of the subject, sites and scale of the performative.

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that performativity has deeply impacted on geographic thought in feminist geographies and beyond, and that the concept has transformed in some surprising ways. After decades of scholarship and debate, many of the original tensions presented in Butler’s early work are still visible, though they have become refracted, redefined and relocated in various geographical and epistemological sites. In a reflection of the ‘ongoing limits’ of performative thinking in geography, Nelson (2014) partly attributes these remaining tensions to an overreliance on Butler’s early work and a general lack of engagement with the manner in which Butler herself has revised her thinking. Engaging later works of Butler’s – ones more concerned with relations, ethics and precarity (2001 onward) – Nelson argues, might change the way we imagine the subject of performativity, leading to more productive engagements with performativity in geography.

We argue here that yet another shift is visible in Butler’s most recent scholarship, which more squarely attempts to bring together earlier investigations into gender performativity with the aforementioned shift toward ethics, human community and political struggles. These later works offer some interesting and unanticipated responses to the issues that have organized and polarized debates about performativity in geography. A renewed attention to Butler’s work and the ways in which she attempts to rework the terms of the discussion will certainly be instructive for ongoing applications of performativity in geography, especially given the ‘relational turn’ evident in both Butler’s thought and emerging subfields of geography.

**Future directions: taking the ‘relational turn’ with performativity**

Having summarized the development of performativity and how it has been employed in geography, in this final section we consider some potential sites of innovation in performative thinking and future directions for geographic work. We briefly engage Butler’s recent work to consider how she has reworked performativity, before turning to forward-looking experiments
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with performativity that, like Butler’s later work, signal a ‘relational turn’: a theoretical reorientation that has illuminated new conceptual terrain in the social sciences and humanities (for an overview of this ‘relational turn’ in geography, see Jones 2009). While many of these promising geographic applications of performativity predate and perhaps anticipate Butler’s shifts in perspective, we nonetheless argue that is productive to see them as part of the continuous and iterative development of performative thinking.

Butler’s recent work has displayed an interesting reorientation to questions of subjectivity, performativity, relationality, freedom and ethics. In *Senses of the Subject*, Butler adopts a distinctly phenomenological language to reframe the subject of her earlier work. Specifically, she emphasizes the inseparability of linguistic and bodily interpellation (2015a, 14) and the fundamental relationality and dependency that characterize the formation of subjectivity. Issues of intention and agency, likewise, are redefined, as Butler turns away from the terms of discourse toward a phenomenological account of subjectivity:

Something is already underway by the time we act, and we cannot act without, in some sense, being acted upon. This acting that is upon us constitutes a realm of primary impressionability so that by the time we act, we enter into the action, we resume it in our name, it is an action that has its sources only partially and belatedly in something called a subject.  

2015, 62–63

Here, Butler wrestles with the fundamental paradox of subjectivity: how we are necessarily produced through our relations with others, yet we nonetheless recognize ourselves and act as an ‘I’. Rather than jettison this ‘I’ as a site of agency, meaning and intention, Butler emphasizes the need to constantly reflect on how the ‘I’ is never fully formed by these others, nor fully self-fashioning. This formulation echoes and extends Butler’s earlier claims that attending to the relational production of subjects through a gendered matrix ‘is not to do away with the subject, but only to ask after the conditions of its emergence and operation’ (1993, xvii). Here, in this relational conception of subjectivity, we encounter new, and renewed, ethical and ontological problems.

These themes are further developed in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, wherein Butler considers how political protest and assembly might be thought as performative. In doing so, she cautions that we cannot ‘extract the body from its constituting relations – and those relations are always economically and historically specific’ (2015b, 148). Here again, Butler offers a sensitive account of how subjectivity and space are performative and how they arise at a paradoxical site defined equally by the sedimentations of history and the possibilities of the future enacted through a yet to be defined collectivity. Responding to the question of the ‘agency’ of the individual subject, she offers: ‘[f]reedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or, indeed, among us’ (2015b, 88). These passages only hint at a larger reorientation of Butler’s thought, one that holds much interest and potential for geographers both excited and frustrated by her ideas.

These new formulations, bringing together Butler’s post-structuralist, phenomenological and political thinking, offer fascinating directions for further geographic work. Butler’s later work, then, presents rich resources for geographers, engaging parallel theoretical shifts that we might call a ‘relational turn’. Here, we use ‘relational turn’ to signal a diverse and emerging cluster of distinct but related perspectives – including but not limited to feminist new materialisms (FNM), non-representational theory (NRT), actor network theory (ANT) and strands of queer theory – through which scholars have reconsidered and redrawn conceptual mappings that have
structured theoretical debates since the rise and consolidation of post-structuralism in the social sciences. In this section, we present work within geography and related fields that foreshadows and engages this turn, pointing to the ongoing potential of conversations between Butler’s work and geographers.

Bringing Butler into conversation with Deleuze, Dewsbury (2000) usefully redefines issues of the subject by taking a relational approach to the problem of performativity, refocusing on common human practices that produce subjects and worlds, rather than subjects as such (2000, 477). This turn toward practice as a site of performativity is shared with other approaches to geography, including NRT and ANT (see Thrift 2003). In a critical review of NRT, Nash describes that it “is concerned with practices through which we become subjects “decentered”, affective, but embodied, relational, expressive and involved with others and objects in a world continually in process’ (2000, 655). Nash suggests that a critical employment of NRT may create new potentials for geographic thinking, well-illustrated through her example of the historically and culturally located movements and meanings of dance. While these paradigms present interesting potentials for cross-pollination with Butler’s formulations, both ANT and NRT must be approached critically, in that they both appropriate and develop the concept of performativity without drawing from feminist theory or considering gender as a necessary analytical term.

Within feminist theory, performativity has undergone related shifts. For example, feminist scholar Horowitz takes on the thorny ontological questions of Butler’s account by revisiting and rethinking the (non)distinction between performance and performativity. Drawing on FNM and queer theory, she interrogates and reworks the metaphysical commitments of performative thinking, recasting performativity as an inquiry into the interaction of heterogeneous sites, discourses, bodies and subjects. For Horowitz, then, the ‘referent’ of performativity is necessarily a constellation of relations, rather than a subject (2013). Other feminist scholars have further ‘queered’ the subject of performativity, stressing processes of becoming and unbecoming and their implications for ideas of identity, agency and freedom (Bunch 2013). Further, feminist scholars working within science and technology studies have pushed the boundaries of performativity for thinking through philosophical, methodological and ethical questions posed by posthumanism and other relational ontologies (Birke, Bryld and Lykke 2004; Hovorka 2015). These directions hold much potential for geographers, inasmuch as they are concerned with the constellations of relations that produce space and subjects in historically, culturally and geographically specific ways.

A contextual and relational approach is shared across these innovative revisions of performative thinking, including FNM, ANT, NRT and strands of queer theory. What these distinct but philosophically related approaches share is a commitment to questioning taken-for-granted philosophical categories and exploring the implications of relational thinking for long-standing philosophical problems, like agency and subjectivity. We can expect, given these philosophical overlaps with the more contemporary directions of Butler’s project, that there is much potential for further articulating performativity after a ‘relational turn’.

Conclusion

While these complex approaches to rethinking the problems of representation, materiality and agency present us with new theoretical and political challenges, they also open up exciting spaces for critical geography. The most tangible takeaway from these critiques of performativity may be methodological: from the start, geographers have urged practitioners of performativity
to maintain a critical attention to historical, cultural and geographic specificity. Where, then, do these critiques leave us as producers of geographic knowledge?

Geographic debates on performativity over the decades have clarified the uses and qualifications of any approach to performativity. While the performative remains a powerful tool for geographic thinking, it must be finely tuned to context. Nelson’s critique emphasized a reorientation toward fieldwork theory as one way of producing accounts that are geographically and historically grounded (1999). Further, Nelson and others (Benwell 2014) argue that researchers using performativity must be attentive to the ethical implications of applying it to the ‘subjects’ of their research and must maintain critical reflexivity in doing so. A greater attention to specific historical and empirical contexts is, indeed, necessary; Nash argues that ‘[p]utting theories of performativity to work in discussing specific practices makes for better theory’ (Nash 2000, 661). Similarly, Dewsbury explains: ‘whilst the performative, as a theoretical tool or concept, can be used in any given circumstance, its usefulness and what it uncovers and creates are fundamentally specific to the context in which it is sited’ (Dewsbury 2000, 475). In terms of writing and representation, McCormack argues that, ‘insofar as writing is performative, one of its keys tasks might be to elicit those qualities of difference which are always excessive of textual strategies’ and that we must find ‘ways of allowing the qualities of movement to animate the logics of geographical thinking’ (2009, 136). Amid the proliferation of innovative uses of performative thinking in geography, it is critical that the term remain connected to its original formulation; that is, as a critique of gendered and sexed subjectivity. These requirements present complex methodological challenges, yet they provide us with exciting directions for ongoing experiments with performative thinking.

In conclusion, the diversity of approaches to performativity in feminist geographies, and geography more generally, evidences the critical impact that the term has had on the field and its potential for developing ways to think about the interconnections of the subject, space and politics. Over the last two decades, critical and timely interventions have pointed out the tensions, contradictions and potentials in performative thinking and highlighted the stakes of engaging the term. Further, geographic debates on performativity, particularly the interventions posed by feminist geographers, have consistently redirected us to critical philosophical, ethical and methodological questions: namely, the question of why and how the way we theorize (gendered and sexed) subjectivity and space come to matter. Rather than be alarmed by the resistance of the term ‘performativity’ to settle into a strict definition or be dismayed by the difficulty of resolving the problem of the subject into conventional wisdom, we might welcome these continuing provocations and transformations in geographic thought. After all, as Butler reminds us:

[...] to question a term, a term like ‘the subject’ … is to ask how it plays, what investments it bears, what aims it achieves, what alterations it undergoes … If a term becomes questionable, does that mean it cannot be used any longer, and that we can only use terms that we already know how to master?

Butler 1997, 162

As of yet, ‘performativity’ shows no signs of mastery; nonetheless, we encourage geographers to continue to mobilize it in creative and critical explorations of geographic thought.
Key readings


References


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