Performativity, Queer Objects and Radical Creativity

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Abstract

During the early 1990s, Judith Butler's concept of performativity radically altered the way scholars thought about gender and sexuality, but by 2020 new meanings had attached themselves to the term. This article works towards a revitalised queer engagement with performativity, seeking to reinstate Butler's focus on constitutive power while questioning the extent to which performativity necessarily reinscribes social norms. By drawing on the turns to affect and objects, the article explores the performative and sometimes radical possibilities that arise out of creative practices of the self. A discussion of queer objects, including books, domestic ephemera, clothing, and items from AIDS activism, suggests material culture and affective practices may intersect with performative impulses, providing the conditions for the constitution of new modes of sexual and social life.

Keywords: performativity, queer, Judith Butler, objects, material culture, social change.

1. Introduction: whatever happened to performativity?

The term "performativity" is a confounded one.[1] Since philosopher Judith Butler elaborated their use of the term in 1990, it has sometimes been collapsed into "performance" (Proulx, 2016; Shefer, 2019) – even though, as Butler took pains to point out, a performance is a "bounded act" while performativity refers to "a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer"

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(Butler, 1993a, p. 24). Performativity does involve doing, but it also suggests a bringing into being under conditions of constraint. The confusion is intensifying. Over the last few years, the term "performative" has been re-framed alongside the latest iterations of the "culture wars". Such terms as "performative wokeness" and the "performative activist" refer to people who, it is said, do little more than forge impressions (McKelvey, 2021). They attempt to position themselves on the right side of progressive opinion, parading their rightness without engaging in meaningful social change; this is "mere show" (Butler, 2024, p. 183). This new use of the performative hints at actions, norms, and the constitution of selfhood and otherness, but it clearly departs from Butler's theory of performativity. Some recent writers gesture towards Butler's theorizing while leaving the term undefined; as a result, older and newer meanings mingle in the minds of readers (Goss, 2021).

Thirty-five years after the appearance of Judith Butler's groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble*, and a year after the release of their latest book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, this article seeks to re-evaluate the concept of performativity. It explains where Butler started with the idea, and asks what else can we do with it. How might performativity continue to be useful in concert with the queer theoretical perspectives it has long informed (Love, 2021, p. 66)? I want to work towards a revitalised queer engagement with the concept by reinstating Butler's focus on constitutive power while questioning the extent to which performativity's operation is necessarily trapped inside social norms. Does performativity always inscribe such norms, or might it hint at a greater transgressive potential? By drawing upon the turns to affect and queer objects, the second half of the article considers the performative possibilities that arise out of creative practices of the self and collective action, and it explores the radical political potential of creative inspiration. I suggest that affective practices may intersect with performative impulses, providing the conditions for the constitution of new – and potentially transformative – modes of sexual and social life. What do these look like and, more broadly, how might we reconfigure performativity for our current social and political moment?

2. Reconnecting with Butler

Patrick McKelvey (2021, p. 27) points out that recent political discourse has stripped the term "performativity" of the Austinian meaning that informed Butler's theorising: "that which enacts what it purports to describe – speech acts yielding real, conventional effects". In J.L. Austin's 1962 book *How to Do Things With Words*, a "performative" is a linguistic declaration that calls into being objects, situations or categories at the same time it names them (Austin,

1962). Butler took up Austin's speech act theory, using it to suggest that identities may also be constituted in this way (Turton, 2024, p. 21). "What I'm trying to do is think about performativity as that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names", Butler wrote; performativity is "the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed" (Butler, 1996, p. 112). To use a famous example, the proclamation "it's a girl", uttered at birth, is the start of a process of "girling" the subject that will continue in the days and years to come (Butler, 1993b, p. 232). In this anti-essentialist position, gender is not an interior truth but the result of a thoroughly social process – the use of language, in this case (Butler, 2004, p. 212; see also Jagger, 2008, p. 93). During the early 1990s, many queer theorists adopted a social constructionist approach that focussed on the foundational significance of discourse (Callis, 2009).

Subjective action was not the focus of Butler's approach at that time.[2] In 1993 they wrote that the repetition involved in performativity is not "performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject" (1993b, p. 60, original emphasis). This process of making, and the "covering over" of the "constitutive conventions" through which it takes place, is the foundation of Butler's theory of performativity (Umphrey, 2011, p. 521). So the apparent stability of a state or category – "girlness", for instance – "congeals" over time and may even be assumed to be "natural" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). What is actually happening, however, is a form of memesis: for Butler, the categories we come to see as "natural" are merely copies of the idea of an original category. Gender, for instance, "is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself" (Butler, 1991, p. 313). The social subject is not the originator of this process, but emerges through it. In sum, for Butler, gender is not a performance that "a prior subject elects to do", but instead performativity "constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express" (Butler, 1991, p. 24).

Performative constructions are far from capricious or incidental. Butler suggests they take shape under conditions of cultural constraint, or "regulatory regimes", that impose some formations of gender and sexuality (and/or race, class, and so on) while disallowing others. Such constructions take shape in different ways, depending on their context, and they can have material effects. During the 1990s there was much constraining language in Butler's writing. Norms are repeated through "a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler, 1990, p. 33); femininity involves "the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex

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[2] For more on Butler's conceptualization of subjectivity, see Brickell (2005) and Bunch (2013).

historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment" (Butler, 1993a, p. 23). In this bleak assessment, the feminine subject, as performatively constituted, is compelled to reiterate the norms through which she came into being. The norms of gender and sexuality are also fused together: Butler suggested gender norms "operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity", and these ideals are "almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond" (Butler, 1993a, p. 22). It is not quite clear to what extent "almost" mitigates "always", or how totalising is the requirement to embody, but a pessimistic determinism hovered uneasily behind Butler's early explanations. In one essay, for instance, Butler (1991, p. 314) wrote of a heterosexualized version of gender as a "compulsory performance".

But there was some limited room for movement in Butler's early work. "Subversion" offered a limited degree of manoeuvre within the "simultaneous production and subjugation of subjects" (Butler, 1990, p. 145; 1993b, p. 84; for a discussion, see Brickell, 2005). For instance, parodic forms of gendering may help to displace "naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculinist hegemony and heterosexist power" by introducing hyperbole and dissonance; these highlight "the very constructs by which they are mobilized" (Butler, 1990, pp. 23; 33; 34). Such tentative strategies make what they can of the "occasional spaces" in which "annihilating norms … are mimed, reworked, resignified" (Butler, 1993b, p. 84). As "productions of realness", for instance, drag performances might help to reconstitute what being gendered "really" means by denaturalizing heterosexual gender norms (Butler, 1993b, pp. 85; 89; see also Butler, 1991, p. 317). In this view, political potential resides in forms of resignification that may shift individual or collective consciousness – but, as in the case of drag, nothing can be guaranteed (Bloomfield, 2023).

Many sociologists of gender and sexuality focus on the mutually-reinforcing relationships between structure and agency, selfhood and social action (Connell, 1987, p. 95; Risman, 2004, p. 433). Not all would agree that the norms of gender and sexuality exist a priori, that social subjects are forcibly constructed through them, or that such processes prevail until the contingency of these norms is (subversively) revealed to a newly-enlightened world (Jackson & Scott, 2002, p. 19). For symbolic interactionist sociologists, for example, relationality is crucial: the gendered and sexualized subject is constructed and reconstructed during interaction with other people as well as the symbolic universe of meaning-making (Brickell, 2022). Subjectivity and norms are reflexively constituted, and their character and relationships shift over time. People "do interpretive work to figure out who and what we are", as Weinberg (2015, p. xix) puts it. Other sociologists insist upon the importance of social institutions and institutionalized practices, including the state, economic

systems, and family life (Edwards, 1998). As Barbara Risman (2004, p. 433) sums up, "gender is deeply embedded as a basis for stratification not just in our personalities, our cultural rules, or institutions but in all these, and in complicated ways".

By the early 2000s, Butler had begun to suggest that performativity may involve concerted social action. In *Undoing Gender*, published in 2004, Butler writes about the Black South Africans who arrived at polling stations during the apartheid years. "They performatively invoked the right to vote even when there was no prior authorization, no enabling convention in place" (Butler, 2004, p. 224). This arrival at a polling booth had its discursive aspects, including an assertion of rights through talk, but it also constituted a broader form of collective endeavour. This political insight represented a shift in emphasis in Butler's writing. The 2014 article "Performative Agency" further acknowledged the role of "non-discursive" practices in the performative constitution of social phenomena (2014, p. 11). Butler also eased back on the extent to which particular formations of culture and identity are forced, required or compelled.[3] They noted that "performativity starts to describe a set of processes that produce ontological effects, that is, that work to bring into being certain kinds of realities" – but, crucially, these may not necessarily "lead to certain kinds of socially binding consequences" (Butler, 2014, p. 10). An active subject finally appeared too. Butler began to suggest that people must take up utterances and endeavour to put them into action, when conditions are felicitous, in order to make things happen (Butler, 2014, pp. 10-11). Butler's revisions paved the way for a more reflexive, dynamic – and sociologically useful – account of performativity that makes space for agency, action and social change. This becomes clear when we examine the affective aspects of queer politics and relationality.

3. Performativity and productive queer possibility

The positive potentials of both performativity and queer emerge when we understand the sexual self to be social and relational as well as discursive (Love, 2021, p. 68). Queer theory and politics have long concerned themselves with questioning and disrupting binaries, exploring new values, adopting an "anti-identity" stance, and investigating the performed or dramaturgical self (Butler, 1993a; Callis, 2009; Love, 2021). Alberti (2012, p. 90) helpfully suggests we regard queer as a "mode of analysis" or a "positionality": a way of seeing rather

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[3] Charpentier (2019) offers an excellent discussion of Butler's (occasionally dissonant) shifting positions on questions of ontology.

than a thing in itself. Alberica Bazzoni (2019, p. 59), a scholar of literature who writes about queer and feminism in the Italian context, adds that we may most profitably see queer as "a destabilizing and mobilizing vector rather than as a post-identity category". Such an approach speaks to both the intersection of self and society on the one hand, and the possibility of transformation and liberation on the other (p. 60).

Affective engagements have shaped queer politics and experience. Both Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a literary theorist, have suggested that shame plays a foundational role to the extent that queer subjects have been interpellated – that is, brought into being – "through shame" (Butler, 1993a, p. 18). Sedgwick regarded shame as queer's "originary affect" and suggested that "queer performativity" might best be understood as a "strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 11). For Sedgwick, "a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" emerges out of queer shame (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 4). In this account, negative feelings give rise to an energy and a performative potential (Love, 2021, p. 2). This is, however, a somewhat unsatisfying starting point. Sedgwick's consideration of "transformative energy" is welcome, but why should shame sit at its centre? Shame is undeniably bound up in many queer people's experience in heteronormative societies, as are hostility, harassment and violence (Bunch, 2013), but is shame truly the "originary affect" of queerness as Sedgwick suggested in 1993? Why not a desire for social, intimate and/or sexual connection, a political commitment, or something else (Allan, 2019; Amin, 2013)? It seems clear that positive as well as negative affects hold transformational and performative promise: the feelings embedded in shared experiences, new forms of awareness, connection, solidarity, love and friendship.

Queer activism may emerge at the intersections of performativity and affect. In an Austinian sense, linguistic performatives include such examples as "I sentence you", "I dare you", or "shame on you" (Sedgwick, 1993, pp. 3; 4; 11), but other "transformational grammars" engage different affects. For instance, the slogans "Lesbians are everywhere" and "Gay is proud" hint at self-confidence and social ties of varying strengths (Di Feliciantonio, 2014, p. 34). The voicing of these definitive statements may foster visibility and call subjects into existence, and, ultimately, the statements become true for those who engage with them. "I am an ally" also has a performative element, as it brings "a new relation into being" (Goss, 2021, p. 100). The AIDS activism of the 1990s involved "the increasing theatricalization of political rage" (Butler, 1993a, p. 23), while Queer Nation and Gran Fury (an offshoot of ACT UP) engaged a "politics of provocation" involving boisterous protests and a visual culture that intervened in the politics of bodies and identities (Callis, 2009, p. 214; Desai,

2014). But not all activism is planned, noisy or otherwise agonistic. "Implicit activisms" do not involve dramatic, staged actions, for they are quotidian and often modest in scope (Horton & Kraftl, 2009; see also Parrinello, 2021, p. 427). Implicit activisms foster everyday bonds of care through "small acts": companionship, empathy, kind words, and mutual support (Martin et al., 2007, p. 79). Early Italian AIDS activism, for instance, was built upon the concept of solidarity and mutual support, and a coalitional public politics grew from there (Arfini et al., 2020). When shared in queer contexts, such performatives as "you are brave", "you are smart" and "you matter to me" may help to (re)constitute identity alongside, or in tandem with, more provocative forms of politics. Queer rage and implicit activisms can exist alongside one another.

A range of new possibilities appear when we take up Butler's later interest in social actions and relations. Queer subjects take part in an "ever dynamic and unending processes of subject formation" (Soto, 2010, p. 6), and a failure to comply with social norms may lead to new forms of selfhood. This "creative force of a becoming" (Bunch, 2013, p. 40) may drive novel engagements with space (Monaco & Corbisiero, 2022), new definitions of "family" (Bertone, 2017), the way legal subjects are constituted in court and in the broader field of human rights (Umphrey, 2011), and so on. Some subjects subversively inhabit "the social categories through which we are constituted in unexpected ways" (Jagger, 2008, p. 103), and proliferating queer identities might hold the potential to transform heteronormative society (Bunch, 2013, p. 46). As Sam Orchard suggests in the context of a New Zealand queer literary festival: "Part of the act of being ourselves is political, right? When we say who we are. When that's different from the norm, that's a political act" (cited in Brickell, 2023, p. 199).

4. Objects, creativity, solidarity

What is – and could be – the place of creativity and objects in the operation of performativity, and and how do these relate to implicit or explicit queer activisms? The following section considers this question while drawing from a range of international examples. There has been much written over the last two decades – especially the period after 2018 – on the relationships between "queer" and "objects" (Ahmed, 2006; Brickell & Collard, 2019; Davidson & Rooney, 2018; Meiu, 2023). Davidson and Rooney (2018, p. 3) suggest queer might be imagined as an "orientation toward certain objects", and they consider the "discursive or material effects of recasting queer as either a turning toward or a turning away from certain objects, things or persons". Although the literatures on performativity and objects have not thus far intersected, Davidson and Rooney hint that the relationships between people and material culture can

give rise to new forms of culture and resistance. Similarly, Ahmed (2006, p. 161) proposes that contact with queer objects, including normative items rendered queer in some way, can "disturb the order of things" and create novel connections and meanings.

Our engagements with objects may generate a range of feelings and emotions. In a domestic setting, the smell of fresh coffee brewing on the stove, the strains of a favourite song coming from the stereo, or items on the table next to the bed, may evoke intimate relationships that underpin a queer identity (Orr, 2012; Sheffield, 2014). A kitchen table is a vital tool for a group of people who spend their weekends excitedly – or resignedly – planning a social media campaign or publishing activist literature (Szulc, 2019). In this way, the domestic items that tell of curiosity, creativity, familiarity, reassurance, safety or pride may also operate performatively. As Ahmed puts it (2006, p. 44), "objects not only are shaped by work, but … they also take the shape of the work they do". By way of example, Max Andruki and Dana Kaplan examine the role of the private home in the constitution of trans subjectivities. They suggest trans subjects are often "enmeshed in queer assemblages that knit together bodies, objects, and temporalities and challenge both heteronormative and humanistic orderings of private space" (Andruki & Kaplan, 2018, p. 784). A range of domestic objects, and assemblages of objects – binders, vials of hormones, photographs of people – speak to transitions between earlier and later moments in the life-course and contribute to the "emergence of everyday trans life" (p. 794). Technologies modify the trans body and/or render it visible (Baldo, 2019, p. 71). In this case, the performativity of trans subjectivity is both linguistic, in the Austinian sense, and mediated by material culture and social connections.

Objects bestow a "transformative energy", to use Sedgwick's words, when enmeshed in social relations.[4] Australian geographer Andrew Gorman-Murray (2008, p. 285) suggests that practices of collecting and using domestic objects generate "material anchors" for affirming and nurturing queer identities, and that possessions come to "symbolize self" (p. 287). Artwork and photographs may reinforce people's relationships to partners, friends and family members, and household objects can play a public role. The domestic spills over into the public sphere when a placard sits in a front window and is seen from the street, or when a home owner paints their house in the colours of a pride flag. These acts generate political effects: the placard and the colour scheme may inspire a young passer-by and help them to build a queer identity, or they may upset the conservative neighbours and cause dissension.

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[4] For a discussion of the 'thing power' of objects, see Bennett's (2010) work with actor network theory (ANT).

AIDS activists have made the most of the political power of art and other objects that can be taken up in ways that reconfigure perceptions of the self and the world (Zanetti, 2020, p. 108). The 1980s poster-based campaigns by New York-based Gran Fury, for instance, used the symbols of advertising to capture viewers' attention before introducing them to transgressive messages: "kissing doesn't kill: greed and indifference do" (Desai, 2014). The campaigns operated in more than one direction. Their imagery "acted as a rallying cry, a point of identification for those inside the movement" (Gran Fury, 2024, p. 43). Conversely, campaigners "hawked ideas, swayed minds and shifted perceptions about AIDS" among the wider population (Lowery, 2022, p. 4). Widely-disseminated red AIDS ribbons, pinned to clothing, worked to performatively reconstitute public perceptions of the illness from an intangible, mysterious phenomenon to a knowable and important issue of health and public policy. The ribbons helped to foster solidarity: those who made and wore ribbons expressed their support for people living and caring for those with HIV (Hoffman et al., 2020). As beacons that draw people in and bring them together, those objects can be politically useful.

The intersections between art, affect, clothing, the body and political protest further reveal the performative potential of objects. Marcus Bunyan (2019) has written about the black leather punk jacket he bought in 1989 in Sydney, Australia. Bunyan extensively modified the garment, giving it new value. He sewed on numerous patches, including the pink triangle "used to identify gay (male) prisoners sent to Nazi concentration camps because of their homosexuality" (Bunyan, 2019, p. 344), and he added the words "Silence is the Voice of Complicity". This is a reference to the slogan "Silence = Death", a call to arms widely put out by AIDS activists (Lowery, 2022, p. 40). The jacket now has metal studs and a rainbow; the Union Jack flag is a reference to Bunyan's early life in England. A slogan, "Oh Bondage, Up Yours", was the title of X-Ray Spex's feminist punk song. Bunyan's jacket cited the symbolism and slogans of AIDS activism, and by wearing it in public he performatively resignified "punk" as "gay". His jacket played a small role in consolidating "gay punk" as an identity in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia's largest cities. "By the very fact of being a 'gay' punk and skinhead", he wrote, channelling Butler, "I was effectively subverting the status quo" (p. 347). He and his then-partner publicly protested against the racism often associated with punk:

> [We] used to walk around Melbourne dressed up in our gear, including the jacket, holding hands on trams and trains, on the bus and in the street. Australia was then such a conservative country, even in the populated cities, and our undoubtedly provocative actions challenged prevailing stereotypes of masculinity. We wore our SHARP

(Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice) t-shirts with pride and opposed any form of racism, particularly from neo-fascists (p. 347).

Dress codes can reinforce differences of gender, class, age and status, but queer people can also modify and wear clothes in ways that rework symbolic meaning and express pride or defiance (Getz-Salomon, 2023; Ventrella, 2020). They may use their bodies as a canvas, tattooing them and accessorising with cosmetics or hair dye. Affective elements are integral to this process: the restyling of Bunyan's jacket was "a labour of love that took several years to reach its final state of being" (Bunyan, 2019, p. 347). Repeatedly wearing the garment in public, in a "conservative country", engendered pride while requiring a degree of bravery. Queer emotions may operate as a motivating force that drives social change. As Bunyan's experience demonstrates, a sense of shared adversity can be a binding agent.[5] Affective responses to social marginalization – in the street, on public transport and elsewhere – can generate solidarity and, in turn, be mediated by solidaristic relations between people.

"Craftivism" and "artivism", then, gesture to the relationships between creativity, performativity, affect and shared action. Collective artistic pursuits may give rise to solidaristic activism and enhanced wellbeing. For instance, making art together can be a solidaristic way to provide mutual support, break through stigma, and ease the social isolation often experienced by LGBTQ+ people (Madden, 2023). Interdisciplinary scholar Joseph Plaster describes the role of performance art and creative actions in San Francisco's queer youth street cultures during the 1960s. He writes (2023, p. 5) of the "performative economy", a "shared repertoire of creative strategies for managing the affective and economic impacts" of social marginalization, and notes that "artistic performances have the potential to create or undermine social reality" (p. 97). Artivism functions as a collective form of performativity because making and displaying art enacts both identity and politics, as curator Uliana Zanetti (2020) points out. She outlines how art and activist organisations in Bologna have worked together to enhance public dialogue about LGBTQ+ lives and politics. Through its exhibitions and community collaborations, the Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna has challenged social exclusion and fostered diversity, thus "queering the museum" (p. 114). Artivism creates relational queer bodies alongside individualized ones. Such relational bodies are "energized by creativity", and collective artistic practice can "help participants imagine a world outside of normativity" (Latorre, 2022, p. 47). American activist Angela Davis suggests the making of art is indispensable in political work. It allows us to "imagine different modes of being" and "different social relations"; it may

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[5] I would like to thank Karl Nuku for this insight.

provide a sense of freedom to those who live "under conditions of un-freedom" (De Guzman & Davis, 2020, pp. 83; 87).

Reading and writing may also be profoundly transformational and liberatory practices because literacy has the potential to shape subjectivity. Queer books, journals and zines realise their performative promise when they give readers new inspiration and offer to "reshape shared cultural habits, thoughts, and beliefs" (Potter, 2022, p. 101). Such reshapings may span the generations: the poetry of the American sensualist Walt Whitman, born in 1819, influenced the writing of philosopher and advocate Edward Carpenter, born in 1844, and Carpenter's work on male homosexuality (especially *Homogenic Love and its Place in a Free Society*, from 1894) inspired gay activist Harry Hay, born in 1912 (Lajoie, 2022). In 1950, Hay established the Mattachine Society, an influential American organisation that lobbied for gay rights. Books and published essays can create connections between temporally and geographically dispersed readers and writers, providing resources for sexual discovery and empowerment. As Potter (2022, p. 102) notes, queer literary objects may "cause disruptions in the present moment" and "direct us toward new directions and departures". Reading is a creative practice, and sometimes a single book has a profound impact upon a reader's sense of self, as Carpenter's *Homogenic Love* did for Hay. A book's influence may then travel across time and between individuals and groups (Baldo, 2019, p. 78). Prevailing norms are contested, not merely repeated, and sometimes inspiration bears a radical potential – as it did when Hay spurred along the gay rights movement (Timmons, 1990).

Chains of creative inspiration link both backwards and forwards. In classes in schools, at universities and in community centres, for instance, teachers and lecturers bring new knowledge to their students while simultaneously learning from those students' own insights. (To this end, Butler's 2024 book, *Who's Afraid of Gender*, is dedicated to "the young people who still teach me"). Di Feliciantonio (2014) points out that universities in Italy, as elsewhere, have been the locus of student groups that have supported queer solidarity and intervened in wider transformative political movements. Queer festivals and literary events also do performative work on a number of levels (Bazzoni, 2019; Brickell, 2023; Damiens, 2020). Books, comics and literary performance art influence the consciousness of those involved, and inspiration emerges in the interactions between presenters and those who listen to them talk. These events nurture solidarity by building cultural and social capital and expanding networks of "affectively connected individuals" (McAleese, 2018, p. 205; see also Martin et al., 2007). As participants interact with queer literary objects and other people, they articulate selfhood and resistance, experiment with new ideas, and may build a politics (Soto, 2015, p. 48).

5. The performative effects of queer joy

The recent concept of "queer joy", which has strong links to the social movements of people of colour, brings together some of these performative impulses (Duran & Coloma, 2023; Iacovelli, 2022). While the trauma of marginalization cannot and should not be overlooked, Tristano (2022, p. 277) advocates a move away from regarding "minoritarian subjects" as people "who experience and carry trauma with them", suggesting this often elides the constellations of care and joy present in Black communities. Instead, "a joyous state allows us to explore the limits of human curiosity; renegotiate what relationships can look, feel, sound, and smell like" (Tristano, 2022, p. 279). Queer joy has an affective power; it embraces laughter, love, "out-of-placeness", and the building of new knowledges, cultures and relationships (Duran & Coloma, 2023, p. 115; see also Wright & Falek, 2024).

The objects and practices through which queer joy is performatively constituted may be analogue or digital. Music recordings, whether made by queer performers or others, inspire gay listeners as they inscribe personal meaning and piece together an identity (Smith, 1995). Persaud and Crawley (2022, p. 3) suggest musicians' work can "materialize joy", rendering it both tangible and potentially transformative. These and other authors have discussed the work of Black gay artist Lil Nas X, whose songwriting and exuberant videos challenge dominant constructions of sexuality, embodiment, religion, self-confidence and conformity. Bresler et al. (2024) discuss the 2021 video for the artist's hit single "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)", a flamboyant mix of genderplay and hedonism that draws upon the imagery of fantasy worlds while parodying binaries of sexuality, gender, and the human/non-human. "The spectator is situated in mutually reciprocal processes of affective transmission" with the artist's self-portrayals, write Bresler et al. (2024, p. 160), and this imagery produces "the *affects* of disgust, wonderment, and delight". As digital queer objects, music recordings and videos may help fans reimagine what the social world might become, and what their place in it might be. In this way, these digital objects are performative, not simply representational (Baldo, 2019, p. 74). Their distribution on social media – Lil Nas X has made particular use of TikTok in particular – disrupts heteronormativity to varying degrees, challenging silences and essentializing discourses, and opening spaces for recognition (Proulx, 2016; Shefer, 2019, p. 425). Materialization often operates along intersecting axes of social power. "Especially for Black queer people like us, Black transgender people, I think it speaks to … the capacity to imagine a world otherwise, to be in relation with each other, to foreground joy in a world that otherwise doesn't want us to have it" (Persaud & Crawley, 2022, p. 3). A celebration of joy can be an assertion of presence.

Queer joy, objects, public spaces, and the defiance of social norms, often overlap (Di Feliciantonio, 2014; Parrinello, 2021). For instance, Turesky and Crisman (2023) discuss the objects that enabled and commemorate Los Angeles Pride parades. Posters, volunteers' rosters, and photographs taken in the streets all illustrate how such parades, and the collaborative processes of organizing them, "acted as a joyous space of community organizing where disparate groups came into discursive interaction with one another, building social and political capital as they demonstrated a shared, public identity" (p. 269). Like queer music, the parades' expressions of public joy signify an act of public resistance, a challenge to "heteropatriarchal culture", and an assertion of the right to "protected space, freedom, and humanity" (p. 270). Pride parades tell of pleasure in queer identity in public spaces, a blurring of "rigid spatial binaries" (Parrinello, 2021, p. 421), and an escape from everyday experiences of discrimination (Monaco, 2022, p. 89). Joy is "a political emotion", as Davis and Platt (2013, p. 52) discuss; its celebration is an assertion of being and a demand for a place to stand.

Joy is only one form of affect with performative potential. I agree with Love (2007, p. 54) that we should resist any temptation to erase "all traces of grief" from public accounts of queer lives and seal them off "in the past of homosexual abjection". As Butler (2004, p. 214) has noted, those who reject prevailing norms may be subject to violence or lose employment, family relationships, or even their own lives. And yet, recent iterations of queer joy do hint at the ways in which positive affects can fuel queer modes of contestation. Queer objects, whether they are literary, three-dimensional, analogue, digital, played with or worn, are embedded in circulations of affect and become integral elements of the performative processes that blend together the private, the public and the political. They push our imaginations to "explore sexuality's various *elsewheres*" (Meiu, 2023, p. 17; original emphasis), and they often provide "material anchors" – to return to Gorman-Murray's term – for collective endeavour.

6. Conclusion: who's afraid of performativity?

Butler tentatively exhumed the concept of performativity in *Who's Afraid of Gender*, but they did not want to "defend or reconsider" the earlier formulation "that clearly now seems questionable in certain ways" (2024, p. 23). These "certain ways" are not spelled out in any detail, although Butler hints at (unspecified) "materialist criticisms" (p. 23). *Who's Afraid of Gender* retains a key insight from Butler's earlier theorizing, that is, people do not escape the "set of norms lying in wait for them" (p. 31) when they become social subjects. We

may find freedom in resisting and breaking with those norms, however. Although we are never "unconditionally self-forming", Butler suggests we can say "no", or act in contrary ways (p. 32). But we can and should do more to reclaim and rework the concept of performativity. We can acknowledge the intricate connections between repeated doings (speaking, writing, acting/enacting, bestowing) and the contexts that shape and constrain these, while embracing opportunities for resistance and transformation. Such a concept might help us conceive of "counter-imaginaries", to use Butler's as-yet-developed term, with the potential to "dispel the grip" of anti-queer ideologies (Butler, 2024, p. 26).[6] Perhaps the shaping of new queer political subjectivities (Di Feliciantonio, 2014, p. 46), informed by novel forms of queer knowledge, can play an important role in reproducing counter-imaginaries. A reformulated concept of performativity allows for new becomings (Baldo, 2019, p. 74).

As Davidson and Rooney (2018) remind us, we might imagine queer as an orientation toward an interlinked range of items that facilitate or hinder our endeavours in a variety of ways. The creativity and inspiration engendered through books and other types of material culture help to performatively constitute new meanings and identities. Objects can "direct us toward certain modes of living over others, toward pursuing some futures and not others" (Meiu, 2023, p. 13). Such performativities are both individual and collective. As practices of the self, even solitary creative moments are socially mediated. Lone artists, readers, wearers, and those who arrange and modify queer objects, interact with the cultural resources made available by their wider communities, and draw upon recursive chains of influence (De Guzman & Davis, 2020; Brickell, 2022). Whether forged in domestic settings, in the streets, in arts collectives or in a range of literary spaces, queer solidarities are informed, enabled and made material by their repeated interaction with objects. Creativity is a means through which collective action is conceived of and galvanized; oppressive practices are resisted, and affects become materialized. People actively support one another – and share "an affective, collective energy" (Baldo, 2019, p. 78) – as they participate in shared creative endeavours. This may happen in a community craft class, a literary event, or a protest placard painting session. There is a clear need for a multidisciplinary approach here: sociologists can examine the importance of collective action in challenging and transforming social structures; art historians and media studies scholars interrogate the influence of creative forms; geographers explore the transgressive potential of space; philosophers, literary theorists and linguists tease out the performative operation of language and narrative, and so on.

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[6] It appears Butler first mentioned the 'counter-imaginary' in a 1998 interview without elaborating upon the concept (Meijer & Prins, 1998).

In *Who's Afraid of Gender* (2024, p. 132), Butler writes about the importance of solidarity as a bulwark against oppressive forms of power, especially at a time when the far right is in the ascendancy and "fascism becomes an acceptable position" to many. In the decades since the publication of *Gender Trouble*, where subversive resignification was imagined to be the primary basis of a progressive politics of gender and sexuality, Butler has become much more concerned with deliberative collective action. They recognize the discernible limits to a sole focus on ideas. But while counter-imaginaries might be "necessarily an ideal conceit" (Butler, 2024, p. 26), newer understandings of performativity must move beyond the realm of the ideal and the linguistic. As Butler implies in *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, material considerations are also important. For instance, a theory of performativity can engage a politics grounded in the elements of inequality, including within queer communities, for queer identities are often brought into being through adversity and struggle (Bunch, 2013; Edwards, 1998; Meiu, 2023; Plaster, 2023). But adversity is rarely totalizing in its effects. In sum, let us regard performativity as a repetitive but dialectical process: queer identities shape social movements, and these movements (and the affects, objects and creative impulses implicated in them) are materially constitutive of reconfigured identities, politics and power relations. This recursive form of performativity is a sociologically appealing one.

So what about that newer, culture wars-inspired version of the performative? Forms of queerness are now often caught in the crosshairs of debate and legal backsliding, targeted by culture warriors on their keyboards and on the streets, and subject to weakened state protections and increasingly harsh legal regimes (Drucker, 2024; Higgins, 2023). We need to pay vigilant attention to the constitutive operations of power. By wresting the performative from its glib new meaning, and putting it to work in the service of radical creativity, resistance and queer joy, we can imagine and instigate new, liberatory forms of queer life.

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