

LOADED QUESTIONS: THE PERFORMANCE AND CREATION OF QUEER IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

Due to the contributions of feminist studies to anthropology, performance and performativity have become significant in the understanding of identity. Using these concepts, I examine the social construction of queer identities in a queer space through the utilization of gendered symbolic actions. The data that form the basis of this article were generated during my participation in a queer games night. The topics that the game posed elicited a variety of identity performances that originated from activities such as identity policing, camp talk, and ‘gayspeak.’ I demonstrate that these activities, in this particular context, work to continually construct, modify, and reinforce the gender identities and sexualities of participants.

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Unlike inculcated heterosexuality, whose practices and values flood everyday life with an allegory of socially naturalised symbols, to be homosexual does not mean—

exclusively— to like the same sex, to be homosexual means to construct yourself, to realise your inner self¹
(Moreno 2010:31).

The question of identity is one that fascinates people globally. How one realizes their identities is a topic discussed in many contexts, from everyday speech to non-scholarly works to academic works. Similar to Daniel Moreno's autobiographically-motivated theory of homosexual identity as stated above, Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (2009[1949]:283), proposes that identities are not derived from innate qualities but rather develop from various social processes. Extending these theories to encompass all gender identities, rather than solely those of minority populations, Butler states that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 1990:25). With Judith Butler's (1990) text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, performance and performativity became an important component of the understanding of gender.

Gender is a social construction that is constantly created and reaffirmed through our actions and speech. Also, through policing these actions and speech, gender roles and identities are reinforced and constructed. Given that we are continuously engaged in the construction of our identities, it is possible to look at any

¹ The above quotation was written by Ecuador's first drag queen, Daniel Moreno, who, in his book, also states that his text "is not the academic study of anthropologists, they are lines written with life and of our everyday; about being Ecuadorian and nothing more" (2010:20). "A diferencia de la heterosexualidad inculcada, cuyas prácticas y valores inundan la cotidianidad con una alegoría de símbolos naturalizados socialmente, ser homosexual no significa – exclusivamente- gustar del mismo sexo, ser homosexual significa construirse, llegar a serlo."

conversation for identity performance. In this essay, I will examine how queer individuals use gender in a queer space to create queer identities through the use of identity policing, humour, and ‘gayspeak.’ To analyze the ethnographic data it is essential to understand both the context of the conversations and the theories of gender, performance, and performativity that originate from feminist studies.

I recorded the conversations during a games night in a classroom at Saint Mary’s University in 2013 that was hosted by the Saint Mary’s University Queer Society. As the game was the main impetus for the conversations, I had little control of the topics and themes of the conversation other than what I contributed to the group conversation. The board game that we played during the night was called “Loaded Questions.” The premise of the game is to accumulate points by correctly guessing which player gave which answer to the questions provided by the game. The majority of the topics discussed during the conversation were prompted by the types of questions asked for the purposes of the game. As a result, although the event was targeted towards queer individuals, the topics proposed by the game assumed the players to be heterosexual. However, the discussion and performance of queer identities developed from the active reinterpretation of the questions to fit the realities of the lives of the participants. The conversational format of the situation facilitated a more naturally-flowing presentation of topics and ideas and demonstrates the use of performance as a tool used in everyday speech.

Six speakers participated in the conversation that I recorded. Verbal consent was given by all participants and, as the research was intended as a class assignment, it was approved by my professor, Dr. Eric Henry, and the Saint Mary’s University Research Ethics Board.

As this essay will focus on the construction of identity, it is clearly important to characterize the sexualities and sexes of the speakers. Tracy² identified as a lesbian woman, Erin and Laura as bisexual women, Amy as a woman who is possibly bisexual (addressed later in this paper), Ceri and I as gay men, and John as a heterosexual man. Tracy, Amy, Ceri, and I were the main players of the game and read and answered the questions. Erin, John, and Laura alternated in reading the answers provided by the other players of the game. The group was arranged along a table, along one side sat Tracy, John, Laura, and I, and on the other side sat Ceri, Erin, and Amy. Also, Tracy, Laura, Erin, and Amy had known each other for many years prior to this event, and were also all friends of John. Ceri and I had been acquaintances for a few months and this was one of the first times we had conversed at length with the others. Another group was present at the event; however, they did not often participate in this conversation, as they were playing a separate game.

The focus on the performance of gender originates from the gender studies and feminist theories of language use. While hegemonic gender roles have been widely understood by the public as natural or derived from human biology, scholars have begun to examine it as a process of continual construction based on the use of symbolic actions (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003:4). These symbolic actions and utterances originate from a repertoire of socially-recognized actions which is variably-accessible to individuals. Individuals selectively choose from the repertoire of symbolic actions to perform their claimed identity. As stated by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, the construction of a gendered identity occurs as people “project their own claimed gendered identities, ratify or challenge others’ identities, and in various ways support or

² I have given all participants a pseudonym so as to protect their anonymity.

challenge systems of gender relations and privilege” (2003:4). The way in which the construction of identity occurs is through the performance of performative utterances and actions. According to Butler (1993), performance and performativity are distinct concepts; performance being “a bounded act” preceded by an actor and performativity “a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer” (24). However, this distinction is critiqued by Moya Lloyd who explains that performance is performative given that it also draws from a shared cultural reservoir and cannot be preceded by an actor as an actor does not simply exist but is constructed out of performative actions (1999:202). For the purposes of this article, I will use the terms synonymously according to Lloyd’s critique of Butler’s distinction. A performative statement is one that does not simply describe; it is “the doing of an action” (Austin 1962:5). The classic example is the statement, “I now pronounce you man and wife,” uttered during traditional, heterosexual Christian marriage ceremonies. This statement, in being spoken by a priest at a marriage ceremony, creates the bond of marriage between the bride and the groom (Austin 1962:13). This conception of performance is equally applicable to other behaviours.

The performance of identity is a concept discussed in passing by participants during the games night. Participants expressed this concept when they assessed the gender identity of a waiter who works at a local restaurant.

C: And you get that *real* cute gay waiter that always talks ya into getting doubles.

J: Except, I was wondering if he was transgendered, ‘cause I thought his voice got a lot higher [over a long period of time]

Here, the speech of the waiter is assessed by Ceri and John. The waiter is initially presented as a gay man by Ceri, yet the identity of the waiter is mapped onto language and how the pitch of his voice is manifested. As the pitch of the waiter's voice progressively increased, John saw the waiter as coming to perform more of a feminine, womanly identity. Very early in life, pitch comes to play an important role in gender distinction. At five years of age, boys and girls have almost identical vocal apparatuses; however, girls tend to raise, and boys lower, the pitch of their voice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:18). This effect is produced through manipulating the length of the vocal tract by spreading or rounding their lips respectively (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:18). Through the lens of this understanding of the association of voice pitch and gender, John came to view the waiter as a transgender person who is in the process of transitioning his characteristics to those of a woman. Participants thus used the principles of performance and performativity to assess and inquire about the gender identity of the waiter.

Similarly, sexuality and attraction are viewed in this group as non-static entities that must be performed. The following interaction occurs during a discussion of friends who have "gay tendencies." In the conversation, John is identified as the only heterosexual friend, but then a previous joke is continued from when he (unintentionally) answered "balls" to a question that asked "What would people be surprised to find out that you enjoy."

A: [All our friends have gay tendencies] Except
maybe *him* [John] but
[pause]

A: {he likes balls}³
 {He likes!}
 {He likes!}

C: {I don't know he likes balls}

D: {He likes balls yeah}

T: He hangs out with like, eighty gay people, I
 think we're starting to have an influence
 on em

...

D: And she's bisexual [points to Amy]
 [pause]

T: She thinks.

D: She thinks she's bisexual ok

T: Personally, I think she is

...

T: If you say I don't know, that means yes [you are
 bisexual]

Here, it is clear that sexuality is not conceived by these participants as the result of isolated, personal desires, but is derived from social interactions and the performative actions. For example, Tracy states that being immersed in a social group that contains a large number of queer people influences the sexuality of the heterosexual. The idea that the sexuality of one individual can be transferred to another is representative of Arnold van Gennep's contagious magic. Contagious magic, as stated by van Gennep, is "based on the belief that natural or acquired characteristics are material and transmissible" (1960[1908]:7). In this case, it is the belief that if a person interacts with queer people, they themselves must be part of that community. Tracy also critiques Amy's

³ Brackets signify that each utterance was made at the same time.

sexuality, as she believes that there is no room for a person to question or be unsure of their sexuality; Tracy mentions this twice during the conversation. She states that to answer 'I don't know' is actually to say 'yes,' and she states that Amy's uncertainty of her sexuality is a clear sign that she is, in fact, bisexual. This idea of either yes or no, but never maybe, is representative of a wider related idea which undermines bisexual identity itself: "Its [bisexuality's] reality or legitimacy is contested by some people on both sides of the hetero/homo divide" (Cameron and Kulick 2003:157n3). In this way, the context of the identity policing affects the legitimate identity choices. Therefore, in asserting a conception of sexuality which deviates from the legitimate expressions, the individual is reprimanded and defined by other members of the group. Therefore, it is important to comprehend the legitimate symbolic actions that are available to an individual to better understand how performance works. As well, the particular community in which a certain expression occurs heavily influences the type of performance of sexuality, and thus affects the identity being performed by the individual. In the case of the conversation, it is important to perform analysis within a context of a queer space that is constructed by the queer participants.

Given the nature of the game, many of the topics and sections of the conversation involved a large degree of humour. The humorous exchanges among participants played a variety of functions in the performance of queer identities and the discussion of these identities during the conversation. For example, various participants used one of the types of humorous speech that is characteristic of the performance of a queer identity: camp talk (Cameron & Kulick 2003:99). Camp talk, according to Keith Harvey, subdivides into various styles which include paradox,

inversion, ludicrism, and parody (Cameron & Kulick 2003:99). Butler theorizes that camp is a political type of humour as it “deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities” (Butler 1990:138). However, camp is also conceived as apolitical by V. Russo, who states that “it deals only frivolously with the roles we’ve been assigned and entails no criticism of them” (as cited in Darsey 1981[1976]:81). The following examples of camp, which represent ludicrism and inversion respectively, are taken from “La Paca,” an Ecuadorian drag queen theatre production by Moreno.

And never absent [at a drag performance] is the gay that says to you: “HEY... SISTER, YOU ARE SO FAT! Why do we have in our head that to be skinny is synonymous of beauty... There’s not only flavour in the bone... it’s also in the pork rind!”⁴

Hey Paquita [character’s name]: ‘to love someone else, first you need to learn to love yourself’ [said by boyfriend] to accept yourself as you are [...] and when you have loved yourself sufficiently, you’ll have so much left over that you will be able to give it to the world... clearly he said this ‘cause he’s a slut.’⁵ (Moreno 2010:120)

Camp is also exemplified in the following section of the games night conversation that discusses the responses to the question

⁴ “y nunca falta la loca que te diga: “OYE... ÑAÑITA ¡QUE GORDA QUE ESTAS!” Por qué tendremos metido en la cabeza que ser flaco es sinónimo de belleza... ¡no solo en el hueso hay sabor... también en el chicharrón!”

⁵ “Oye Paquita: para querer a alguien, primero tienes que aprender a quererte” A aceptarte tal cual eres[...] y cuando ya te has querido lo suficiente, te sobrará tanto, pero tanto amor que podrás dárselo al mundo... claro eso decía el por que es un puto.”

“What do you consider the most important physical feature men look for in a woman?”

E: Dick, boobs, tits!, a big dick!

...

[Laughing throughout]

T: Wait wait

What was the question?

...

J: This is something that men look for in women

Did somebody mix up the question?

[Pause]

C: No

D: No

The evaluation of the answers is a clear example of camp in that it inverts “the expected order or relation between signs” (Cameron & Kulick 2003:100). The answers ‘tits’ and ‘boobs’ are not questioned due to the fact that 1) women, who are assumed to also be females, have breasts, and 2) they are generally sexualized by men in this society. Through answering in an unexpected manner with the genitals of a male, the two gays, Ceri and I, change the focus to one that questions the idea that all men are necessarily looking for physical features in women as opposed to in other men. This example of camp works to undermine the “established value system” by acknowledging and challenging the heteronormative aspects of the game (Cameron & Kulick 2003:100). Also, the fact that this was not simply a misunderstanding of the demands of the question is signalled by the two ‘no’s. This works in contrary to the statement of John, which acts as a performance of an identity aligned with the heteronormativity that the game reinforces. Being a way to

undermine the values of the producers of the game, and an assertion of intentionality to the heterosexual, male member of the group, this example of camp aligns with Butler's politicized theory of camp, rather than that of Russo. The questioning of the heteronormativity in this section works to construct the boundary between the two gays and the values of the game.

Throughout the conversation, there was occasional discussion of activities or objects that index a queer identity. Indexicality is the indirect referencing of an identity through its association with what is assumed to be a pre-existing characteristic of that identity. This occurs following the moment when, John, in attributing which answer was given by each player, chose Ceri as having given the answer of apple martini to one of the questions. Earlier he chose Ceri as the one having written "big dick" in the above example. At this point, Ceri questions John's guesses, as he was not the one to give these answers, and the gender and sexual identities that these answers index.

C: *Why*[hits table] are you *always*[hits table]
choosing[hits table] the *gayest*[hits table] *things*[hits
table] for *me*[hits table]

[laughter]

J: I, I thought

C: Suddenly I like appletinis and big dick

Here, both apple martinis and big dick are seen as indexes of an identity which is exceptionally gay, as described by Ceri. Earlier comments draw at least "big dick" into the sphere of a gay identity. Ceri earlier stated that John had to guess which person wrote "big dick" as an answer.

C: Yeah now just pick which, which, which one of us four is a size queen

According to Hayes, in “gayspeak,” the term used to refer to the language of gay men, ‘queen’ is one of the “most widely employed stem word[s] for building compounds,” and refers generally to a gay man (1981:71). It therefore has general use among gay men and is used by them to refer to other gays or those who exemplify characteristics of gay men. Hayes provides the example of two gay men commenting on a well-dressed mayor by saying they are a “neat queen;” here, using the term queen does not refer to the sexuality of the mayor, but on their being well-dressed as gay men are generally seen to be (1981:71). Therefore, using the term ‘size queen’ as a way of saying ‘one who is attracted to large penises,’ draws this idea into the realm of a gay identity. In this way, the use of the term performs a gay identity, given its association with ‘gayspeak’ and with an individual who is assumed to be gay and who has, in other utterances has performed a gay identity.

Upon questioning Ceri about the connection of apple martinis to a gay identity, he stated to me, “I wanna say sex in the city or drag queens” (Ceri, email, March 30, 2013). While the exact reason that this indexes an extremely gay identity is not clear to the participant, it still works to represent a gay identity, yet the assumptions that are present within the explanation indicate connections to gay themes and themes of femininity. Drag queens are men who perform for comic, artistic, and theatrical motive, as an exaggerated form of a woman (Barrett 1995:152). Similarly, “Sex and the City,” is a television program which is a fictional representation of the lives of women often featuring their gay friends. Overall, Ceri’s use of the term *gayest*, in concert with the other terms used, defines one of the ways in which a gay identity is

constructed. The *gayest* concepts defined by Ceri all involve femininity. For example, to like large penises is to be a size queen, (*queen*, as defined by Hayes (1981:71), also implies effeminate behaviour as it is the title of the highest-ranking woman in some types of monarchical systems); apple martinis call to drag queens and “Sex and the City.” As all of these concepts call to femininity; therefore, in this case, to perform a gay identity is to perform one that is more feminine than masculine.

Gender and sexuality are identities that are constantly constructed and reinforced through the performance of various symbolic actions and utterances. The conversations that I recorded during the games night demonstrate a variety of performative actions. It is clear from the policing of the sexualities of John and Amy that sexuality is highly intertwined with social interactions based on van Gennepe’s concept of contagious magic and legitimate performances. Humorous exchanges of camp worked to create an inversion of the gender roles and values of the wider society to both signify a queer identity and create a queer space. Furthermore, various terms that call to femininity such as ‘queen’ and ‘apple martini’ are used throughout the conversation to continue the construction of a gay identity. Finally, it is through performance and performative statements that sexuality is constructed through the utilization of gendered actions and topics.

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