

Performativity: Pasts, Presents, and Futures

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The contributions to this volume of *Whatever. A Transdisciplinary Journal of Queer Theories and studies* all engage with a seminal issue of queer theories and practices: performativity. By framing the keywords of the call for papers in the plural, and by including not only the presents and futures of performativity, but also its pasts, CIRQUE hoped to facilitate connections between queer studies and areas of the humanities and social sciences which are normally perceived by queer scholars as alien and remote. We are very glad that this challenge has been taken up, and hope that this will be the first step of a productive and exhilarating dialogue.

The articles we are presenting are, each in its own way, interesting, original, and provocative; they can speak for themselves without any need for me to introduce or summarize them. In these short preliminary remarks, I would like to focus on our choice of topic, and on its relevance on the most urgent challenges facing the LGBT movement today. At this time, all over the world, the rights of LGBT people, as those of other minorities, are being questioned, threatened, attacked; our choice of theme, performativity, was, and is, of crucial importance to one main form these attacks are taking, the so-called “anti-gender crusade”.

The main ideological target of the global right’s so called “anti-gender campaigns” is an idea that in the European Union has been enshrined in law since 2011, when the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence was ratified in Istanbul. The Convention spells out, in article 3, that “gender” “mean[s] the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men”, that is, that gender is not natural, not a necessary consequence of biological sex, but performative. The so-called anti-gender crusade is therefore, first and foremost, an attack on performativity.

However practically inconvenient, personally enraging, and politically and ethically unacceptable, this worldwide backlash against performativity is, to my mind, a powerful reminder of the momentous practical import of what may superficially appear purely theoretical, and even overly abstract, issues and concerns. On the one hand, performativity can, as all queer scholars know, build the foundation of a rewarding and creative scholarly career; on the other hand, the backlash against performativity is the inspiration behind the most vicious attacks against the hard-won rights of LGBT people. If anyone tries to question the relevance of queer studies to the real world, and to the most pressing, and most important, social and political issues, all we have to do to prove them wrong is to point them to the World Congress of Families, or to the “*veilleurs debout*” / “*sentinelle in piedi*”, or to the attacks against LGBT people which are reported in the news every day, and to the many more which aren't.

That performativity is the main ideological target of the global right's so called “anti-gender campaigns” is proved by a wealth of evidence, which runs the gamut from the ghastly, to the uncanny, to the laugh-out loud funny. My personal favourite is the recent petition in which tens of thousands of enraged Christian fundamentalists demanded of Netflix that it stop streaming the Amazon Prime miniseries *Good Omens* which, by depicting an angel and a devil not only in a mutually satisfying homosocial relationship, but also teaming up to prevent Armageddon, advances the idea that not only humanity, but also angelicity and demonicity are ultimately performances. I believe that the very virulence of the panic of the religious Right, and the very violence of its manifestations, are not only unacceptable in the political discourse of a self-respecting democracy, but also clear evidence of fundamental bad faith. Let me explain.

The religious Right maintains that one main rationale for its violent reactions is the fact that children, who of course in this contexts function as the icons both of futurist investment, and of paternalistic vulnerability, are not being “sheltered” and “protected” from what in the European Union is, and has been since 2011, neither more nor less than the letter of the law, that gender is socially constructed. In Italy, as well as in a number of other so-called democracies, this fact is presented as a plausible reason to panic, and this panic is maintained and heightened through the spreading of tententious misinformation, not only through social media, but in the press and on television; for civil servants, at least in Italy, the consequences are

not infrequently bullying, intimidation, threats, and sanctions threatening their employment.

However, at the deepest and most fundamental level, what these vicious and irrational attacks show is that our aggressors actually agree with us. If, in their opinion, the only way to preserve “gender purity”, to get people to stick to traditional gender roles instead of questioning, queering, and subverting them, is to avoid people being exposed to the dangerously radical idea that, as the EU legislation unambiguously spells out, gender is not a necessary and natural implication of biological sex, this actually shows that they themselves believe that biological sex in no way naturally or necessarily implies gender performance. Because, of course, if sex “naturally” implied gender in the same way that being a mammal naturally implies breathing through lungs, there is no way that “indoctrination”, of no matter how “vulnerable” social subjects, could ever hope to alter this fact, just as no amount of no matter how early and pervasive indoctrination could ever hope to get us, or any other mammal for that matter, to suddenly “convert” to breathing underwater and grow gills.

Of course, our opponents have always known this. The famed Jesuit maxim “give me a child for his first seven years and I will give you the man” is evidence of a lucid awareness of the complete malleability of so-called “human nature”; and that this included gender identity is witnessed, for example, by cardinal Mazarin’s decision to have Louis XIV’s younger brother, Philippe, brought up in as feminine a way as possible, in order to curb his interest for political power, and therefore any possibility of rivalry with his brother the king; the plan was a complete success. The Duke of Orléans “feminine interests” included not only openly effeminate attire and behaviour but also sex with men; however, nobody minded, least of all the Cardinal: gender and sexual non-conformity were a small price to pay for the political stability of the kingdom.

One of the most dishonest claims of the gender bullies is that they embody “tradition”; of course discrimination, oppression, and violent and murderous repression of minorities are only too well represented at all times and places in European culture, up to and including the present time; however, a different tradition does exist, and it includes some of the most prestigious intellectuals in the history of the continent. In formulating the call for papers to include the “pasts” of performativity, CIRQUE intended to inaugurate and facilitate work on a history and a genealogy of the concept

much in the spirit of what has been achieved by the LGBT movement in unearthing early examples of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and communities in the past.

To this end I believe it may be of interest to note that, as far back as 1486, one of the most important intellectuals of the Renaissance, in one of the most influential works in the cultural history of the West, described human nature itself as performative. Pico della Mirandola in his (admittedly thoroughly anthropocentric) inquiry into the reasons for the unparalleled admiration of which humans are supposed to be worthy, singles out as the hallmark of the human condition, and as the reason of the superiority of man to “astral beings and of the very intelligences which dwell beyond the confines of the world”, the fact that man has “nothing wholly his own” but may “share in the particular endowment of every other creature” and is thus a “creature of indeterminate image”, which may therefore, like Proteus, assume any shape.

Pico’s argument, however, manages to hold at the same time two positions which we now perceive as contradictory: that of an unbounded voluntarism, and that of what which we would now define as performativity, one which is at the same time soberingly considerate of the role of environmental influences (man is described as a “chamaleon”), and occasionally astonishingly daring in its utter disdain of the connection between natural form and its performative actualization. As Pico writes, “it is not the bark that makes the tree, but its insensitive and unresponsive nature; nor the hide which makes the beast of burden, but its brute and sensual soul; nor the orbicular form which makes the heavens, but their harmonious order”; from this to the recognition of the right to self-determination of people whose outer appearance does not align with their identity the step is so short that it is indeed bewildering that it took Western culture half a millennium to take it.

In the face of all this, each of us is called to elaborate their own strategies of resistance. One is disseminating the results of our research through the Web in a way which makes them accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and a sufficient command of the language in which we write. And this is the reason *Whatever*. A transdisciplinary journal of queer theories and studies exists.

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