

Disassembling Assembly: An Exploration of Normativity, Gender Performativity, and Assemblage Theory

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Introduction

The question of identity holds profound weight and value in a myriad of contexts for discourse in current society. On many levels, it plays a significant role in informing both the ways we interact with the world around us as well as the way *the world* interacts with *us*. Moreover, the patriarchal capitalistic systems of power that govern our daily lives create the connection to identity by categorization—and oftentimes oppression—based on a person’s place in this hierarchy of power. Something so fundamental to the daily lives of the people in a culture centered around identity should be able to speak to their individuality. However, this is generally not the case; the denominations associated with the term “identity”—which, for the purposes of this paper, refers to normative and essentialized identity—do more to support hierarchical structures of power than they do the people they describe. That which can lead to the freedom for self-expression for some can be a means of restriction for others, particularly those whose lived experiences do not fit precisely into the space of a particular label.

The hierarchical structure provided by labels, which are societally created and subsequently enforced, can cause the stagnation of a person’s identity. They can feel stuck within their label, which can allow for their existence to be legible to others, but may not fully encapsulate a more dynamic personhood. If there were more space within the structures of society to allow fluidity to be recognized, the actual lived experiences of individuals may be made more legible. However, this comes into contention with the normative system of categorization—how do we break down this contention between self-expression and normative society? How much of one’s own fluidity or subversivity can one expect to be intelligible in a system whose existence is contingent on the usage of labels and the upholding of oppressive and normative structures?

In their work, Judith Butler writes from a poststructuralist theoretical standpoint, aiming to explore the ways systems of power construct knowledge. Butler particularly focuses on the way the concept of gender is created and upheld with their theory of performativity. It is from this context that Butler wrote their book *Gender Trouble*,¹ which explores the way power structures produce the normative concepts of gender that exist within a gender binary. In this text, Butler presents their theory of gender performativity, arguing that the social construction of gender is maintained through the cyclical enforcement and reinforcement of gender roles and norms. Moreover, they assert that whether one fits into normative gender roles “successfully” determines whether one is intelligible in normative society.² If one does not fit neatly into the category of a dimorphic gender identity, one is rendered illegible. This illegibility can be harmful; non-normative identities go unsanctioned by normative society. Thus, these identities are often targets for the ostracization and persecution of those who fall outside of the gender binary, as we frequently see in cases like the current rise in anti-trans rhetoric. Comparably to how the gender binary exists within a hierarchy, so do cisgender and transgender identities. These hierarchized identities are created through systems of power and are continually upheld by the norms that become associated with these identities.

Assemblage theory contrasts sharply with Butler’s performativity theory, removing these identity markers altogether. First introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,³

¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 2007).

² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xix

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

and later expanded upon by Manuel De Landa,⁴ this theory recognizes and allows for fluidity of identity. Focused on studying the relation between parts and wholes, assemblage theory highlights the totality of human existence, rather than reducing it to one singular aspect. The wholes, or assemblages, are created by the unification of individual components, which can either function on their own or as part of the assemblage in its entirety. In this essay, an assemblage generally pertains to a singular person and the various aspects of their selfhood. In assemblage theory more broadly, however, an assemblage can include groups, organizations, populations, nations, and other entities. What makes assemblage theory so valuable, for the purposes of this paper and beyond, is the extent to which it recognizes that entities are never fixed, nor are they permanently stable. Instead, they can, and frequently *do*, change.

Using Judith Butler's theory of performativity in tandem with assemblage theory, this essay explores the dissonance between the configuration of identity and the variability that is so intrinsic to the human experience. I use Butler's theoretical framework to examine how identity is constructed and made normative before delving into assemblage theory, which I believe offers a means by which we can start to consider methods of deconstructing normative identity. While the scope of this paper is limited specifically to identity as it pertains to gender, this concept can and should be expanded upon to analyze the construction of other identities, including—but not limited to—sexual orientation, race, and class. The existence of normative structures, upheld by the usage of labels and repetition, restricts the freedom for identity to evolve and for fluidity to exist. We must critically examine the ways in which the current patriarchal capitalistic system of power reifies and accordingly restricts identity and thus determine an alternative means for understanding personhood.

The Construction of Identity...

To understand the broader context for Butler's theory of performativity, we must first examine the way they contrast sex versus gender. Butler claims that both are socially constructed, as opposed to the

⁴ Manuel De Landa, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. (New York: London New York Continuum, 2006).

common idea that gender is socially constructed and sex is naturally occurring:

“The category of ‘sex’ is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault called a ‘regulatory ideal.’ In this sense, then, ‘sex’ not only functions as a norm, but it is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, ‘sex’ is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, ‘sex’ is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time.”⁵

Therefore, gender *and* sex are fabricated by systems of power, and each is affiliated with its own history and politics. Sex is that which informs gender, which then reinforces the sex binary: the foundation upon which the gender binary is built and from which gender norms are created. Reducing sex to either “female” or “male” minimizes sexual diversity to one of two sets of essentialized components and causes harm in the sense that a person's intelligibility is only recognized if their gender performativity aligns with the reductive traits of their assigned sex. If it does not, they are rendered unintelligible.⁶ Further, this essentialization leads to attempted universalized identities on the gender binary, despite the fact that this does not account for the variation of identities based on their given context. As Butler puts it, “once ‘sex’ itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory term. ‘Sex’ is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be

⁵ Judith Butler, “Introduction” in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), xi-xii.

⁶ Tangentially, this essentialized sexual binary also leads to the erasure of intersex people, which can and does lead to issues with identity as well as issues within the medical field, particularly in cases of intersex babies who receive sex assignment surgery at birth and are not made aware of their chromosomal makeup.

one of the norms by which the 'one' becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility."⁷ Currently, the terms "assigned female at birth (AFAB)" and "assigned male at birth (AMAB)" help depict this phenomenon; they recognize and describe the experience of having one's sex inform said gender and the subsequent performance of that gender.

This brings us to the central tenet within Butler's theory of performativity, which posits that gender is constructed by the dominant culture and its conventions, created and enforced by repeated gendered acts: "There is no subject who is 'free' to stand outside these norms or to negotiate them at a distance; on the contrary, the subject is retroactively produced by these norms in their repetition, precisely as their effect."⁸ Through this process, gender identity itself becomes a reified construct instead of a means for self-description, and is consequently restrictive. While initially, an identity marker—in this case, "male" or "female"—can be the means by which one is intelligible to others, the repetition of gendered actions associated with the given label can become what is normative. What was once potentially dynamic becomes static. The label no longer serves those it may have previously. It is harder to subvert prescribed gender roles once they become reified, as identity inevitably becomes more static at that point.

It is important to differentiate between gender *performativity* and the *performance* of gender. Performativity should not be reduced to performance.⁹ For Butler, "Performativity...is to be read not as self-expression or self-presentation, but as the unanticipated resignifiability of highly invested terms."¹⁰ In other words, gender performativity is specifically characterized by the roles that are inscribed into the gender binary as well as the way one performs gender through normative systems of power:

Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered

self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms....The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal [they are]¹¹ compelled to approximate. This failure to approximate the norm, however, is not the same as the subversion of the norm.¹²

Gender is forged through systems of power that survive by creating division between gender identities, as well as restricting people's freedom of expression through said identities. Additionally, the repeated signification of dichotomous gender norms maintains the normativity of the gender binary and related gender roles.

It is from the reification of identity, like that pertaining to gender, that assemblage theory forms. This reification is accomplished by labeling the identity (i.e. "male" or "female"), leading to the aforementioned universalization and essentialization of identity. As Deleuze and Guattari describe it, "...names are taken in their *extensive* usage, in other words, function as common nouns ensuring the unification of an aggregate they subsume....This jeopardizes, on the side of words and things both, the relation of the proper name as an *intensity* to the multiplicity it instantaneously apprehends."¹³ The repetition of the cycle of gender—in which a person's sex assigned at birth (already typified by genealogy of related norms) informs their gender performativity, which then further upholds normative gender—then only serves to further reify the social construct of gender. In assemblage theory, this is demarcated by the concepts of territorialization/deterritorialization and coding/decoding:

...the processes of assembly through which physical, biological, and social entities come into

⁷ Butler, "Introduction," xii

⁸ Judith Butler, "Critically Queer" in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 22.

⁹ Butler, "Critically Queer," 25; paraphrased.

¹⁰ Butler, "Critically Queer," 28

¹¹ I specifically changed this from the original phrasing, "s/he is," to reflect the shift to increasingly common usage of the gender-neutral "they" in academic writing since the publication of "Critically Queer" over 30 years ago.

¹² Butler, "Critically Queer," 22-23

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 28

being, processes that must be conceptualized as *recurrent*. This implies that assemblages always exist in *populations*, however small, the populations generated by the repeated occurrence of the same processes...The combination of recurrence of the same assembly processes at any one spatial scale, and the recurrence of the same kind of assembly processes (territorialization and coding) at successive scales, gives assemblage theory a unique way of approaching the problem of linking the micro- and macro-levels of social reality.¹⁴

This process in assemblage theory ties back to the Butlerian conceptualization of the role repetition plays in formulating knowledge or, more specifically, the matrix of gender. Through the repetition of gendered acts, gender is then created. Assemblage theory also recognizes that recurrent processes assemble an entity, like identity. The definition of this entity, whether it is through territorialization or coding, is that which upholds and reifies it. This essentialized construction of identity—in this paper, gender identity specifically—is harmful because it limits the intelligibility of the vast variety of human experiences. The social entity of gender identity means that it “...is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed.”¹⁵ As long as normative identity is upheld, the intrinsic variability of an individual’s personhood is not free to exist. Normative identity does not allow a person to be in control of their own gender expression. Rather, gender is thrust upon them, and they are put in the position of finding their place within the existing dimorphic system of gender.

...So That It Can Be Deconstructed

If the construction of something like gender identity is so inherently ingrained into structures of power, then how do we go about subverting it without inadvertently reinscribing the very system which we are trying to deconstruct? This is where a framework like assemblage theory is particularly valuable. As opposed to an identity-based framework, like that of intersectionality, assemblage theory holds space for connections of individual parts without the need

for a stable, universal identity. Applying assemblage theory does not devalue intersectionality, which valuably recognizes the ways one’s various identities and cultural contexts interact. Rather, comparing the two approaches highlights the parallel way in which the two frameworks help conceive a notion of fluid identity. Assemblage theory highlights the importance of critiquing the stagnation of a person’s intelligibility caused by a stabilized identity and offers the potential to reframe the way in which we understand ourselves in the context of our experience.

Identity itself is defined through its linearity and permanency over time, and this “...timelessness works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity in every space.”¹⁶ Because of the static nature of identity, it inevitably works toward creating a universalized definition that can work in all contexts. Even if the identity label in question is intended to be more inclusive or fluid, it inevitably becomes reified by repeated usage. Essentialized identity aligns with patriarchal and capitalistic systems of power, placing an individual within hierarchized institutions, their place designated by one aspect of who they are. Both theories of identity and assemblage emphasize the role of these individual aspects; assemblage in particular notes that the whole will change with the addition or removal of any given part. However, identity-centric frameworks keep these components separate, whereas assemblage theory gives space for these individual parts to intertwine so that the whole adjusts across time. As Jasbir K. Puar states in “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages,”

The Deleuzian assemblage, as a series of dispersed but mutually implicated networks, draws together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect. As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes components...are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency. Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and

¹⁴ De Landa, *A New Philosophy*, 18

¹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34

¹⁶ Jasbir K. Puar, “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages” in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 520.

time, generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative of identification....”¹⁷

While both assemblage theory and intersectionality theory are entry points to exploring the role of power in the conceiving of one’s selfhood, assemblage is more helpful in understanding the flux of human existence with its reliance on emotions and affectivities, as opposed to declaration and stabilization of what it means to be a human. The stabilized subject reduces personhood to a singularity. While this phenomenon allows for intelligibility in an identity-centric institution, the harm lies in staticity. When an individual does not fit into an essentialized meaning of an identity, they are no longer legible within this system.

Frameworks based in identity are reliant on the essentialization, universalization, and reification of existence, while “...assemblage theory does not presuppose the existence of reified generalities.”¹⁸ Instead, the theory centers itself around the idea of multiplicities and assemblages, where an assemblage refers to the way wholes and parts relate and a multiplicity, while similar, is less strictly defined along those lines and can describe nearly anything. Deleuze and Guattari explain the relationship between the two by saying “An assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously. There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality...a field of representation...and a field of subjectivity....Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders.”¹⁹ The multiplicity of an assemblage is what makes it ideal for exploring how to make the instability of *being* legible; because the various entities that comprise an assemblage “[come] forth from all directions,”²⁰ it has the capability to uphold fluidity.

With an understanding of assemblage theory, how then can we work toward deconstructing the institutionalization of identity? De Landa claims that in order “[t]o avoid reification we must instead focus on the historical processes that produce these

products, with the term ‘historical’ referring to cosmological and evolutionary history in addition to human history.”²¹ The genealogy of identity is that which stabilizes it and ergo restricts the ability for the variability of an identity to be recognizable.

Conclusion

In contrast to claims that labeled identities are an inherently negative social construct, the comparison of performative and assemblage theories highlights the limits of assuming that a given set of labels, like those for gender, are adequate to represent human experience. Labels are not inherently bad; they serve to describe the lived experiences of many. However, the way normative structures craft identity aims to uphold social institutions, and the limits of these labels become apparent when they fail to include those who exist outside them. In the words of Butler, “This is not an argument *against* using identity categories, but it is a reminder of the risk that attends every such use.”²² Identity is not *bad*; it allows for the intelligibility of people in varied contexts, especially in a society reliant on essentialized labels. Moreover, many people find security and stability by identifying with and using certain universal labels. However, there are those for whom a stabilized identity is restrictive and who are inevitably harmed by the way these essentialized structures are maintained. As Butler’s theory of performativity demonstrates, normative identities on the whole generally do more harm than good. No one can fit precisely and completely into the ascribed gender role into which they are placed. Each lived experience is unique and consequently informs one’s own identified experience. Indeed, the endeavor to develop a matrix of identity is the inherent flaw.

Therefore, while there is certainly value in the normative identity structures that are currently in place, it is crucial to consider not only how they impact people individually but also the way they function in their totality. In what way are these structures necessary in the current iteration of our social landscape? Conversely, how do these structures do a disservice to individuals by summarizing an individual experience in a handful of universalized words? In what ways do these structures reinforce

¹⁷ Puar, “Queer Times,” 520

¹⁸ De Landa, *A New Philosophy*, 25

¹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 23

²⁰ Puar, “Queer Times,” 520

²¹ De Landa, *A New Philosophy*, 26

²² Butler, “Critically Queer,” 20

a patriarchal capitalist system that aims to suppress multiplicity?

Lived experience requires conceptualizing identity in a way that intrinsically represents and maintains a space for fluidity and change. What could be the most beneficial and accurate means for conceptualizing identity lies in a lack instead of in an abundance. It is in the attempts to define and understand the complexities of identity that theoretical frameworks fall short, and often inadvertently reinscribe systems of power. Perhaps instead, the answer is formulating a framework that is explicated by the absence of structure; maybe it is not even a framework in the first place. The solution to this conundrum likely is contained within assemblage theory, which maintains a space for fluidity, accurately supporting and making intelligible lived experience. No individual is unchanging for the entirety of their life. *Identities* may be static, but *lives* are fluid. It is paramount that we devise and utilize a theory that recognizes this. To not do so would be a disservice to life itself.

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