

## READ MORE ABOUT IT

**The Bathroom Problem**

Judith Halberstam, author of *Female Masculinity* (1998, 20–21), analyzes the boundaries and policing of gender in feminist theory, in histories of women passing as men, in film, and in drag king performances. She begins her book by noting feminist arguments with foundational approaches to gender: “that anatomy is destiny, that gender is natural, and that male and female are the only options” (21). For Halberstam, who is often mistaken for a man, her project is to explore her own performance of gender as cross-identification, that of a masculine woman. This ambiguity is not “read” as a viable alternative, but as wrong. Language, institutions, material bodies, political ends, and social relations all come together to enforce two gender lines in her “bathroom problem.”

Ambiguous gender, when and where it does appear, is inevitably transformed into deviance, thirdness, or a blurred version of either male or female. As an example, in public bathrooms for women, various bathroom users tend to fail to measure up to expectations of femininity, and those of us who present in some ambiguous way are routinely questioned and challenged about our presence in the “wrong” bathroom. For example, recently, on my way to give a talk in Minneapolis, I was making a connection in Chicago’s O’Hare airport. I strode purposefully into the women’s bathroom. No sooner had I entered the stall than someone was knocking at the door: “Open up, security here!” I understood immediately what had happened. I had, once again, been mistaken for a man or a boy, and some woman had called security. As soon as I spoke, the two guards at the bathroom stall realized their error, mumbled apologies, and took off. On the way home from the same trip, in the Denver airport, the same sequence of events was repeated. Needless to say, the policing of gender within the bathroom is intensified in the space of the airport, where people are literally moving through space and time in ways that cause them to want to stabilize some boundaries (gender) even as they traverse others (national). However, having one’s gender challenged in the women’s rest room is a frequent occurrence in the lives of many androgynous or masculine women; indeed, it is so frequent that one wonders whether the category “woman,” when used to designate public functions, is completely outmoded.

It is no accident, then, that travel hubs become zones of intense scrutiny and observation. But gender policing within airport bathrooms is merely an intensified version of a larger “bathroom problem.” For some gender-ambiguous women, it is relatively easy to “prove” their right to use the women’s bathroom—they can reveal some decisive gender trait (a high voice, breasts), and the challenger will generally back off. For others (possibly low-voiced or hairy or breastless people), it is quite difficult to justify their presence in the women’s bathroom, and these people may tend to use the men’s bathroom, where scrutiny is far less intense. Obviously, in these bathroom confrontations, the gender-ambiguous person first appears as not-woman (“You are in the wrong bathroom!”), but then the person appears as something actually even more

scary, not-man (“No, I am not,” spoken in a voice recognized as not-male). Not-man and not-woman, the gender-ambiguous bathroom user is also not androgynous or in-between; this person is gender deviant.

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## Performativity Project 1: Identity Constitution as Material and Historical

Judith Butler (1988) first introduced the idea of performativity by utilizing metaphors from the theatre to ask the theoretical question, “How is gender produced?” Butler answers this question by making claims about embodiment, history, and boundaries as performed onstage.

Onstage, *performers materialize characters in and through their bodies*. Butler is careful not to use the word “construction,” for that would imply “social construction” of identity. Instead, materialization—the body’s appearance, acting, and doing—is her important term. In a way, characters in a play do not exist until they enter the playing space or are spoken of by others. Materialization, then, is about presence (physical embodiment) and language (discourse). For Debby Thompson (2003, 132), “gender identity—or any other kind of identity—is not something that you *have*, but something that you *do*—or, at least, something that you have ‘only’ by doing it again and again and again.”

*Bodies onstage are always produced by and change through history*. So actors always perform bodies within a set of historical conventions and director’s cues for how the body *ought to* move, gesture, and articulate itself onstage. A quick look at a silent movie—starring Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, or Clara Bow—demonstrates how differently performers approached film acting, their bodies, and their expressive equipment one hundred years ago.

Traditional theatre requires a script to be memorized, rehearsed, and enacted anew in each performance. But scripts are starting places for interpretation, not fixed repositories of meaning. Despite the time and place of any *one* performance, performers, directors, and scripts are always part of the ongoing “history” of the theatre. Butler (1988, 526) draws parallels to performance of gender: “The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.”

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler (2004, 1) changes her language from “act” to use a different theatrical metaphor: “[Gender] is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraints. Moreover, one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary.” This doing of gender is



very much about the interplay between historical conventions that create room for play as well as create boundaries. We are rewarded for observing these boundaries and punished for crossing them. Butler describes this tension as “acting in concert” with others, and “acting in accord” with the conventions of gender. The metaphors of the theatre remain powerful explanations for how gender is materially and historically constituted, especially when we remember that performance is not solely mimesis (imitation), but also *poiesis* (making) and *kinesis* (breaking).

### Choreographing Identity: Bodies and History

Perhaps the most illustrative and helpful example of the materiality and history of bodies in “scenes of constraint” is dance. Susan Leigh Foster (1998) argues that approaching the performance of gender as choreography is a fruitful way to concentrate on bodies, the codes and conventions for bodily movement and interaction, and the changing histories of those conventions through time.

For Foster (1998, 5), choreography is “the tradition of codes and conventions through which meaning is constructed in dance.” Those traditions and their meanings have changed through time. Three hundred and fifty years ago, the now standardized, but different, movements for women and for men in classical ballet were just developing.

Throughout the eighteenth century, male and female dancers shared a single vocabulary of positions and steps. They performed the same traveling phrases, beats, turns and jumps, with stylistic differences that signified their roles: male dancers jumped higher, multiplied the numbers of beats and turns, and exhibited a more forceful grace than female dancers, who performed smaller versions of these steps with a softer and more fluid style. By the early nineteenth century, the choreography celebrated distinct vocabularies for male and female dancers—dainty and complex footwork and extended balances for women, and high leaps, jumps with beats, and multiple pirouettes for men. . . . [By 1850] partnering included sections of sustained, slowly evolving shapes in which male and female dancers constructed intricate designs, always with the male dancer guiding and supporting the female dancer as she balanced delicately and suspensefully in fully extended shapes. (11–12)

These changing codes and conventions for gendered embodiments always “resonate with cultural values” that are structured, deeply embedded, and practiced by individuals.

If Foster’s “vocabularies” for dance are foreign to you, then imagine the choreography of certain sports in the above paragraph. How do basketball, soccer, volleyball, baseball, and softball create different “vocabularies” of movement for women and for men? For race and ethnicity? For performances of class? How is partnering, or teamwork, manifested differently in these sports? How do cultural values regarding masculinity, femininity, and sexuality permeate these embodied sports practices? How have these movements changed through time?

### Choreography in Performance Studies

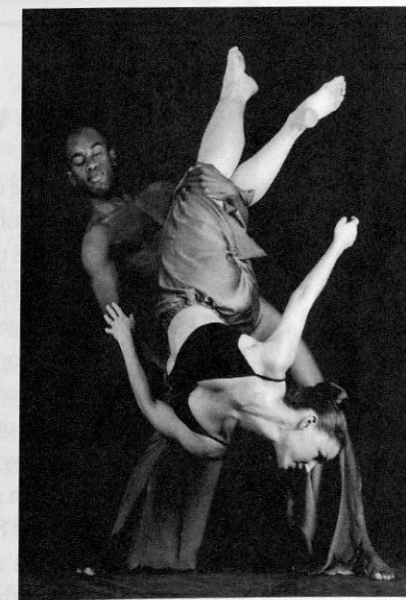
Choreography is a rich term for performativity: bodies in movement, bodies in social relationships, bodies performing within and against historical codes and conventions are all visible in dance, sports, fashion, and their mediated representations and practices. Foster (2002) extends the dance metaphor to include “all bodily articulation, whether spoken or moved,” like walking and cooking. Bodies are always positioned in space and time; what may seem “spontaneous or incidental . . . upon closer examination, signal[s] the exercise of intelligent and creative responsiveness” (127).

Much work in Performance Studies explores dance through performativity. The tango has received special attention for its carefully choreographed masculinity and femininity as both passion and violence (Roy 1995; Taylor 1998); the waltz engenders bodies, especially in Disney animated films, as asexual (Bell 1995a). Kent Drummond (2003) analyzes the Ballets Trockadero de Montecarlo dance troupe. The troupe is famous for their campy and wonderfully funny renditions of classical ballets in which men, on pointe and in tutus, perform all the women’s roles. Their performance makes us think twice about what we think is “natural” and “normal” for gendered bodies in classical ballet.

Ethnographies of dance companies are important critical observations on the materialization of gender through dance. Judith Hamera (1994) studied the Pasadena Dance Theatre to discover the ways that masculinity is produced in the company. Male dancers described their work, in partnering and lifts, as “a tow truck,” “a crane,” “just a big set of delts,” and “Here I am—upper body strength” (204–5). Yet the male body “is the show” dependent on women dancers to create their performances of masculinity, encapsulated in the phrase “can’t live/lift with ’em, can’t live/lift without ’em” (208).

In Marilyn Bordwell’s ethnographic account of one dance production, *Where the Buffalo Roam*, staged at the University of Iowa, she describes a coming-out-as-lesbian story related in dance:

The section begins with LaToya slowly walking on stage carrying a straight back chair in her arms. There is a spotlight, centered on the dark stage: she places the chair in the middle, then sits, perched on the edge. . . . The chair loosely represents her shell, or the closet that both protects and stifles. She clings to the chair, and seems reluctant to leave, yet also reaches desperately out. . . . One of the spoken narratives begins, “My mother would deny me by not speaking to me for three months.” . . . Each movement is urgent; LaToya’s performance gives bodily voice to the stories we hear. (2000, 30)



SOURCE: Photograph by Bob Gonzalez.  
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Bordwell writes of identity as performative: “identities are negotiated on an ongoing basis. We enact who we are—or rather who we are becoming” (31).

Dance choreography—as historical conventions, as bodies in relationship, and as materialized in practice—is one vivid example of the becoming of a “self” through performativity. Performativity is a theory of how this gendered self is constituted.

### MAKE A LIST

#### Dance Nation

Make a list of all the kinds of dances you can think of: square dances, hip-hop, clogging, break dancing, the waltz, headbanging, modern dance, tango, jazz, ballet, line dancing, and so forth. Then draw up a list of gender rules for each kind of dance: How are male and female bodies supposed to look and to move? How do typical costumes reflect and enable these movements?

How are social relations reflected in the choreography? (Solos? Couples? Groups?) How are race and ethnicity bound to these dances and social relations? Where do these dances typically take place, and how do these places reflect rules for class divisions?

### How Is History a Weight?

Dance is a vivid example of bodies materializing genders within historical codes and conventions. While all of us perform identity with reference to past ways of performing, some of us feel the weight of this history of conventions more heavily than others. Elin Diamond (1996, 4–5) explains gender as “both a doing—a performance that puts conventional gender attributes into possibly disruptive play—and a thing done—a pre-existing oppressive category.” For Marilyn Bordwell (1998, 375), approaching gender, race, class, and abilities as a performance “recognizes that we are born into and must operate within a network of power relations not of our own making.” History is a way to describe this past and present set of power relations and categories that weigh on people to compel certain kinds of performances.

In much theatre and film, “gender trouble” is playful comedy. In the real world, however, identity issues are carefully policed, and we are punished for performing these histories incorrectly. Oriental bodies are seen as exotic, erotic, with “ineffable foreignness” in the West (Kondo 1997, 9). Some African Americans are accused of “acting white” in language and action that excludes them from community (Alexander 2004a; Lei 2003). “Acting straight” is a performance that involves a complex set of communication codes that are performed and always risk discovery (Robinson 1994). Each offstage, real-life performance brings punishment, social sanctions, and taboos that are very real.

Shame is one way to describe the felt realities of these performed identities. Eve Sedgwick describes “Shame on you!” as typical language directed at gays and lesbians by churches, government, education, the military, and families: “Indeed, like

a stigma, shame is itself a form of communication. Blazons of shame, the ‘fallen face’ with eyes down and head averted—and, to a lesser extent, the blush—are semaphores of trouble and at the same time of a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge” (2003, 36). Jim Ferris (1998), a performance scholar writing of his decision to pose in a nude photo shoot, writes, “Not only am I putting my naked body on display, but I am putting my shame on display. I am allowing people, even asking them, to think of me as a disabled man—a label I struggled against most of my life.” The taboos against performing “incorrectly” are powerfully felt and embodied.

Shame is an important concept in Goffman’s theory of stigma discussed in Chapter Six. While Goffman was concerned about whether this social identity would be “credited” or “discredited” by audience members, performativity is an argument for the *history* of this shame in institutions and the *felt reality* of this shame in individuals. The weight of history—for abilities, genders, and racialized selves—is felt in/on/through the body. In the body, on the body, and through the body are important ways that identity is constituted.

### READ MORE ABOUT IT

#### Poverty’s Weight of “Good” and “Bad” Poor

*Dorothy Allison is the author of Bastard out of Carolina, Skin, and Two or Three Things I Know for Sure. Those three titles are eloquent testimony to the power of body, history, and language in performativity as identity constitution. In her essay “A Question of Class” in Skin (1994, 13–36), Allison describes the weight of history on her and her family growing up poor in the Deep South.*

... [W]e had been encouraged to destroy ourselves, made invisible because we did not fit the myths of the noble poor generated by the middle class. . . . The poverty depicted in books and movies was romantic, a backdrop for the story of how it was escaped.

The poverty portrayed by left-wing intellectuals was just as romantic, a platform for assailing the upper and middle classes, and from their perspective, the working-class hero was invariably male, righteously indignant, and inhumanly noble. The reality of self-hatred and violence was either absent or caricatured. The poverty I knew was dreary, deadening, shameful, the women powerful in ways not generally seen as heroic by the world outside the family.

My family’s lives were not on television, not in books, not even comic books. There was a myth of the poor in this country, but it did not include us, no matter how hard I tried to squeeze us in. There was the idea of the good poor—hard working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable. I understood that we were the bad poor: men who drank and couldn’t keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and the wrong attitudes. My cousins quit school, stole cars, used drugs, and took dead-end jobs pumping gas or waiting tables. We were not noble, not grateful, not even hopeful. We knew ourselves despised. My

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family was ashamed of being poor, of feeling hopeless. What was there to work for, to save money for, to fight for or struggle against? We had generations before us to teach us that nothing ever changed, and that those who did try to escape failed.

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[Allison's family left South Carolina and settled in Central Florida.] We all imagine our lives are normal, and I did not know my life was not everyone's. It was in Central Florida that I began to realize just how different we were. The people we met there had not been shaped by the rigid class structure that dominated the South Carolina Piedmont. The first time I looked around my junior high classroom and realized that I did not know who those people were—not only as individuals but as categories, who their people were and how they saw themselves—I also realized that they did not know me. In Greenville, everyone knew my family, knew we were trash, and that meant we were supposed to be poor, supposed to have grim low-paid jobs, have babies in our teens, and never finish school. But Central Florida in the 1960s was full of runaways and immigrants, and our mostly white working-class suburban school sorted us out not by income and family background but by intelligence and aptitude tests. Suddenly I was boosted into the college-bound track, and while there was plenty of contempt for my inept social skills, pitiful wardrobe, and slow drawling accent, there was also something I had never experienced before: a protective anonymity, and a kind of grudging respect and curiosity about who I might become. Because they did not see poverty and hopelessness as a foregone conclusion for my life, I could begin to imagine other futures for myself.

In that new country, we were unknown. The myth of the poor settled over us and glamorized us. I saw it in the eyes of my teachers, the Lion's Club representative who paid for my new glasses, and the lady from the Junior League who told me about the scholarship I had won. Better, far better, to be one of the mythical poor than to be part of the "they" I had known before. I also experienced a new level of fear, a fear of losing what had never before been imaginable. Don't let me lose this chance, I prayed, and lived in terror that I might suddenly be seen again as what I knew myself to be.

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## Performativity Project 2: A Strategy for Identity Critique

Performativity is a theory of gender constitution that rejects foundational approaches to gender and argues for gender's material and historical constitution in performance. Because identity is a performance accomplished within a "scene of constraint," this performance can be utilized to critique the boundaries, institutions, and language that produce it. Performance work that shows us identity as not