The Queer and I: (Dis)placing subjectivity

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Abstract

In creating this paper, I intend to contribute to the discussion on Queer Theory's academic focus, expanding it to the grounds of ontology itself. In so doing, I take issue with the fields of subjectivity, identity, and the self, as uncritically addressed sites of presumption, and rather suggest that that subjectivity functions through discursive means to produce the sub-textual (dis)guise of ontology. To dismantle the subject I proceed, firstly, via an articulation of Irigaray's (1985) theory of the subject position's masculine thematisation and its ideological implications, and secondly, through a performative analysis of the self as an intrinsically temporal and historical constitution. Through utilising Queer Theory as such, a critical interrogation can be launched upon the fundamental grounds of subjectivity, and we can reconfigure, rather than dismiss, its ontological illusion.

Keywords

Queer Theory, Subjectivity, Identity, Performativity, Being, Ontology

To practice Queer Theory is not to "be" (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). Queerness, I want to suggest, is not an essential sexual and/or gendered orientation, but rather, is a political tool that underwrites the very notion of stable and cohesive categorical logic(s) (Jagose, 1996). Queer Theory, then, is not an identificatory position(ality), but rather, a critique of the particular discursive mechanisms that enable the concept of identificatory positions/politics to be rhetorically sustained. To this extent, Queer Theory is first and foremost concerned with the presumed ontological and foundational ground of the humanist subject in contemporary discourse (Sullivan, 2010, p. 39). By critically interrogating the ontological strategies that the subject position uses to reaffirm its authoritative presence throughout traceable history we can articulate the manner in which this (re)affirmation conceals its naturalised (re)production and thus effaces the very operations that enable this modality of being (Foucault, 1978, p. 86).

To continue, I will briefly articulate the humanist model of the subject. The (liberal) humanist subject centres on the autonomous, unambiguous, and universal (human) body as a locus of intelligible generative discourse; its functions and capacities stem from a consolidatable modality of sheer existence, one that naturalises a human state or condition as the site of experiential or other phenomenological modes of meaning (Plummer, 2011, p. 197). Queer Theory's poststructuralist engagement with this notion of stability and cohesiveness is then one of enquiry and disruption, exploring the subject's historical discontinuities and its points of cultural variation. Poststructuralism thus contends with humanist conceptions of agency and subjectivity, suggesting that the self is a socially constituted production (Davies, 1991, p.42) and that knowledge and reality are always plural, heterogeneous, and epistemological events. The subject, under this analysis, is not a

universal substrative field that is the basis of identity and knowing. Rather, it is a specific

contingent mode of discursive acquisition and (trans)formation that is co-extensively

produced in/as a product of knowledge/power frameworks, rather than being its precursor.

In positing this, I am suggesting a 'queering' of not only the human subject, but of the

ontological function of the category of subject itself; (re)configuring it as a heterogeneuous

tool of (dis)positioning located within a specific contextual situatedness that is always

negotiated and situated epistemologically through the intersecting fields of (body) politics,

social cohesion, and so on (Murray, 2007, p. 372).

Through utilising the term 'queer' in its verb form, I am mobilising it as a theoretical

device of ontological dissolution; in 'making things strange', 'queering' enables a critical

interrogation of the seemingly fundamental aspects of reality, perception, and subjectivity,

thus revealing their arbitrary construction. Queer Theory thus disrupts the universalised

teleological position of the authoritative and metaphysical subject in history. In locating its

liminality through its position in/as a discursively generative mechanism, we can critically

articulate the manner in which the subject is produced at a discontinuous socio-political

axes of power/knowledge relations, rather than 'naturally' occupying a system that is

orchestrated by its constitutive agency. Queer Theory enables a recuperation of the

historicity of the subject by critically articulating its genealogical emergence within precise

socio-political movements. I would like to explore this claim firstly via an articulation and

expansion of Irigaray's identification of the masculine phallocentric signification of the 'I'

(Irigaray, 1985) and its effected linguistic economy, and secondly, through (re)locating the

subject as a performative mechanism that is enabled through discursive/textual operations

rather than being its conductor, thus recuperating the historicity of bodies. In utilising Queer

Theory as such, the subject can be (re)configured as a textual mode of discursive operation

that always functions within the (situated) realms of cultural intelligibility, rather than being

the site or strategical base for cultural generation.

The Gendering of the 'I'

Language does not play a purely observatory and descriptive function in transcribing reality

into consolidatable and singular 'texts', but rather actively denotes, defines, and frames its

conceptual boundaries, its capacity to be known as such (Farmer, 1997, p. 14). 'Reality',

then, is always a discursive phenomenon that is perpetually reaffirmed through the sub-

textual illusion of ontology. Butler contends that it is the illocutionary act that produces the

notion of reality and as such, it is the textual occasion or act of reaffirmation, rather than

any form of unmediated reality, that constitutes ontological effects (Butler, 2010, p. 151).

Queer Theory, as Case suggests (1991), operates at the site of ontology itself, dismantling its

Platonic borders and reconfiguring its ability to sustain an implied phenomenological reality.

If reality is thus a relativistic term that is enabled within the epistemological borders of

textuality, language, and thus power/knowledge systems, the ability to position oneself as a

subject of/within that discourse is an act of discursive hermeneutics. This textual

enablement of reality is thus an effect of a specific mode of textual contingency, rather than

a self-evident (sup)positioning of an a priori self. The subject, the self, and the 'I' in language

are therefore not neutral invocations of an empirical existence which simply enters into the

realm of linguistic exchange and economies, but rather, are specific modes of discursive

'being' that are enabled by the very systems they have purportedly constructed. This is not

to suggest a critical exegetic delineation of a textual subject, for such logic suggests the 'I'

inhabits a canonical and ultimately continuous point in history. I would suggest however,

that the subject is in fact discontinuous in its genealogy and thus has no teleological

functionality. The subject is not simply present throughout history, it is a discursively

positioned mechanism that enables an incessant reference to the pervasive fiction of the

authoritative humanist subject.

Mobilising this critical framework thus allows for a theoretical exposition of the

mechanisms that enable the taxonomy of the 'I' (in its broadest sense), one of which is Luce

Irigaray's underwriting of the masculinisation of the universal speaking subject and her

project to recover femininity within its circular logic (1985). I will not specifically define this

taxonomy however, as language appears to revolve and refer to the situatedness of the 'I' in

the most prolix ways even when not explicitly mentioning it. Irigaray notes ""Woman does

not exist"? In the eyes of discursivity" (1985, p. 111), that femininity is absorbed and

perpetuated by/into a phallocentric economy which does not permit its existence. Her

pertinent observation depicts the social inflections of the speaking position that is always

situated within a particular mode of discourse. Her theoretical engagement here particularly

concerns Queer Theory, as not only is she 'queering' the manner in which the subject is

formed, but she also analyses its socio-political implications on the gendering and

(de)sexualisation of subject positions and identity politics. Her 'queering', then, is one of

phallocentricity, one that suggests the language of the subject (and indeed language itself) is

formed by a masculinist logic that is thus inflected by a Western patriarchal mode of textual

generation. This "discursivity" that Irigaray broaches is a realm that is founded on the

ideological trajectory of masculinity, its historical positioning as the universalised standard

and thus, its privilege as the authoritative speaking position.

Irigaray notes "In our social order, women are "products" used and exchanged by

men" (1985, p. 84). In understanding the feminine as nothing more than an essential by-

product of masculinity, a disposable but nevertheless necessary aspect of the circular logic

of speaking subjects, she identifies a collapsible space in which femininity is formed in the service of a dominant discursive situation. This discursive situation is thus one of the ideological point(s) at which the grounds for patriarchal subjectivity is enabled and permitted; an economics of feminine exchange that supplants the 'Other' as a space of diminished subjectivity, but simultaneously, as a fundamental aspect of its exchange-value. In this system, femininity is thus the infrastructural axis on which masculinity conducts its contract of self-affirmation; hence the masculinised use of 'I' is a historically specific utilisation of the speaking position. The 'I' in this instance, is not simply a way of navigating textual and linguistic encounters, but rather, it is its very means of gendered engagement; not simply a way of affirming one's own positionality (though certainly it has such pragmatic uses), but an architectonic mechanism that is enabled by the patriarchal structure of idenitificatory positions. As such, the 'reality' of the self (and the processes of determining it as such) is always inflected by the social and historical situation in which it occurs. (Textual) reality here is never prediscursive (Irigaray, 1985, p. 85), it is constituted by the mechanisms of its 'speaking' subjects and it is on these terms that the subject is made and sustained as a legitimate point of discursive dissemination and reception. If the subject is constructed and constituted, rather than deployed by an unadulterated agent into intelligible realms, then as Irigaray suggests "the matter from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce itself, to reproduce itself... they ensure its coherence so long as they remain uninterpreted" (1985, p. 75). In this sense, the subject position is a specific mode of ontological fluidity, a seemingly apparent quasi-substance that guises its discursive production by its very means of mobility and enactment.

As a mechanics of being, the (dis)guise of the subject operates at the level of intelligibility itself through enabling discursivity but also emanating a durable incalculability,

as Irigaray and Foucault note (1978, p. 78), in the form of an impenetrable ontological structure. If, however, we suggest that subjectivity is not a prediscursive given that is mobilised in a socio-poltico-cultural realm, but rather, a mechanism enabled via a linguistic and discursive framework that necessitates and disguises its own operations, then the position and category of identity and subjectivity are not essential. Rather they are an architectural requirement of contemporary existence. Systems of identification, then, never divulge any 'true' or 'prior' self to language, rather, it is the structural capacity of identificatory discourse that enables one to occupy a position as a particular subject. If, as Rubin suggests, "we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that culture gives to it" (2007, p. 149), then subjectivity and its discourse (which is necessarily intertextual and multifarious) is always mediated through a grid of cultural literacy and knowledge, a lexicon of signs that anchor (but certainly not fix) particular forms and modes of being to particular socio-political epistemes. Utilising Irigaray's interrogation of the subject position, a 'Queer' analysis of the subject speaking position entails not a simple dismissal of ontology, but rather, a deconstruction of the ways systems of power capitalise on the illusion of ontology to produce certain indisputable positions. In this way, the subject is a mechanism of power, a technique that not only enables political beings to consolidate the space and history from which they act, but an enabling device that is always inflected by its epistemological roots.

Performing the Self

The subject is thus a constituted abstraction of metaphysical ontology; it is not simply present or mobile within discourse, it is sustained in a rhetorical manner. In this sense, there

is no unadulterated *a priori* self that engages with and mobilises the discursive structure of subjectivity, rather, it is this very strategical base that enables subjectivity to be enacted in a historically specific way. This enactment, then, is one that is always discursively situated in and through a particular contextual episteme; a framing that punctuates the capacities and liminal thresholds of potential subjectivity. Subjectivity, rather than a facet of being, becomes an enabling vector, the discursive condition that allows one to engage with and mobilise socially sanctioned modes of being. The self is thus not (trans)formed by or through an immersion in discourse; discursive operations are the occasions that enable the notion of subjectivity and existence. To close the conceptual gap between historically specific ways of enactment and the seemingly paradoxical nihilism of subjectivity, Queer Theory engages with the theories of performance and performativity.

Patton defines performance as the "deployment of signs which have already attained meaning and/or standard usage with the legitimated discourse" ([1995, p. 182](#)). Performance, in this sense, is a discursive act that relies on already established codes and signs to produce conceptual effects which are thus interpreted at the level of ontology. I am not referring to performance in an exclusively theatrical manner (though certainly this is one aspect of performance theory); rather, performance is the ritualisation of behaviours, activities, and identities; the codification of specific ways-of-being that constructs and sustains a deployable and citable modality of existence ([Butler, 1993](#), p. 18). Nor however, am I referring to the existence of an authoritative agent who conducts and deploys signs in a hyper-volunteerist free-willed fashion. Rather, the one who 'performs', per say, is constituted by the very compulsory repetition of their acts (Butler, 1993), and as such, it is the structural occasion and conditions that permit a performance, rather than the act of performance itself, that creates a performing subject, not the free will and textual product

of the actor who is deploying a sign of their own volition. Performativity, then, specifically refers to the axis unto which power functions to produce and normalise identities; it is the proliferous site of discursive production (Harper, 1999, pp. 38-39) and the grounds for intelligible performance. Performativity is thus the paradigmatic capacity of intelligibility itself, as reality is constituted textually through signs, and thus performances. It is a rhetorical pre-condition of subjectivity, "the discursive vehicle through which ontological effects are produced" according to Sullivan's reading of Butler (2010, p. 89). Performativity defines what can be uttered sensibly, by whom, at what time, where and through what means.

The subject, I want to suggest, is thus a performative mechanism that sustains a rhetoric of ontology and continuity through utilising performance as on operative tool of the self. Performance and performativity, then, function co-extensively as the coordinates of power relations, as they ideologically transmit and condition a plurality of signs through a network of cultural knowledge and thus make them available for performative citation by subjects. This is not to conjoin power, performativity, and performance synonymously with each other (or to suggest that the subject is simply prone to these ideological structures), but rather, to suggest that their functionalities operate in tandem in a discursively generative fashion to produce the metaphysics of substance, selfhood, and knowledge. It achieves this, in a Foucauldian sense (1985, pp. 92-94), not through monolithically embracing all manner of existence and action, but rather, through being a constitutional facet of discursive operations themselves.

Indeed, the self is always already performatively constituted by the conceptual boundaries of possibility and potentiality, effect and affectation, power and knowledge. Performativity is thus the grounds for ontological mobility; in emitting the subject as the

longitudinal plane at which discursive impetus is produced and gained, subjectivity localises

being through the enunciation of signs and meaning (Butler, 1993, p. 19). This enunciation,

then, focalises existence through the subject that is performing, disfiguring the contextual

axis at which signification is produced and engendered. It is precisely here, that through a

poststructuralist logic of deconstruction, Queer Theory interrogates the iconographic

register that enables performative schemata. Hence, Butler suggests that

> the I is thus a citation of the place of the "I" in speech, where that place has a certain priority
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> and anonymity with respect to the life it animates: it is the historically revisable possibility of a
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> name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak. (Butler, 1993, p. 18;
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> emphasis mine).

The performative implications of this articulation of the mobilised subject are clear; in

locating the historicity of performance, performativity, and power, Butler 'queers' the

textual position of the 'I' as a temporal site that is reaffirmed through its capacity to be

performatively cited. It is through this socio-historical negation that the subject is stabilised

as continuous and uniform. In locating the discursive contours at which performativity

functions, Queer Theory resignifies performance as a potential vector of power and

performative codes, rather than the agency of an unfettered subject. This genealogical

recuperation then, thematises performance as a specifically historical mode of discursive

production, insofar as it explicitly requires an already established set of behaviours,

identities, and ideologies to mimic. Identity is thus discontinuous (but not ahistorical), in

that its formative trajectory is both prior to the subject and invisible to it.

If, as Butler suggests, "gender [performativity] is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set

of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce

the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990, p. 33; brackets mine), then

applying this logic to subjectivity itself 'queers' and exposes the self as a reified (but crafted) modality of existence that, similarly to power itself, masks its own modes of production. This fetishisation of origin conceals the subject position through a performative register that simultaneously produces and enables the capacity for citationality. This 'congealing over time' as Butler calls it, refers to the historical composition of the body and the subject; that the self is moulded not only in time, but through it and because of it. History, here, is thus the precise enabler of the performative self. The subject is constitutively generated through a performative framework which enables an historically viable citation and stabilisation of its performance. A queer reading, such as Butler's, which shifts the structural integrity of subjectivity to a genealogically locatable episteme, reveals the liminality of the subject position; it is not simply forged in time as a performative utterance, it is a perpetually deployed artifactual discourse which utilises the subject as a suppositional tool.

Queer Theory thus unmakes the subject by articulating its always heterogeneous formation; it is not a structural facet of discourse, rather, it is enabled by the very mechanisms it seemingly mobilises. It does so, firstly, by revealing the socio-political roots of subjectivity and its language. Subjectivity, then, functions through a politically directed discourse of patriarchy and masculinisation which utilises the feminised Other as a conceptual axis on which its economy of signs is mobilised through. The implication here is that the subject is a mechanism of power relations, one that is formed on the basis of an always already inflected system of cultural knowledge. Secondly, to account for the ways in which the subject manifests itself, Queer Theory turns to the theories of performance and performativity. Through a performative analytics, the subject's historicity is shown to be embedded in a framework of citationality which enables, rather than accommodates it. To co-extensively suggest that subjectivity is never fixed, nor is it radically open to

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interpretation, is not to engender a nihilistic and reductionist politic of negation (a common

reading of poststructuralist deconstruction) however. Instead, it demonstrates the plurality

of being, the mobility of ontology, and the heterogeneous capabilities of being and

(un)becoming.

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