

Introduction to Cultural Studies
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Lecture - 23

Judith Butler Gender Trouble - VI Conclusion Lecture 3 - From Parody to Politics

So hello and welcome to this Introduction to Cultural Studies NPTEL course where we are looking at Judith Butler's Gender trouble. So as we said sort of said last couple of lectures, we are done with the text and now we are looking at the conclusion because I believe the conclusion is a very useful sort of text to summarize the entire discourse Butler had offered to us. And also it proposes some ideas which have got radical in nature as well, got radical in quality as well.

So we will just continue with the conclusion now and hopefully we will just wind up very soon. So this is page 186 on your screen where we are looking at the section you know where Butler talks about the artificiality of the natural body and this is the paragraph on your screen we are just about to finish where she says.

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within it, but what cultural apparatus arranges this meeting between instrument and body, what interventions into this ritualistic repetition are possible? The "real" and the "sexually factic" are phantasmatic constructions—illusions of substance—that bodies are compelled to approximate, but never can. What, then, enables the exposure of the rift between the phantasmatic and the real whereby the real admits itself as phantasmatic? Does this offer the possibility for a repetition that is not fully constrained by the injunction to reconsolidate naturalized identities? Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself.

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configu-

Just as the bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the sight of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself. That is a key phrase over here which is worth really and paying attention to, the performative

status of the natural itself. So according to Butler there is no prediscursive natural and this is something that she talked about already.

There is no prediscursive self, there is no prediscursive I you know which can be reified and romanticized etc. So it is a fallacy in argument she says to look at the I in contestation with an artificial other in contestation with an artificial sort of discursive field. The I is always already embedded in the discursive field. So again we are back to this question of the entanglement between identity and corporeality. So identity cannot be divorced from corporeality.

So corporeality is part of identity and the entire performance in production of identity. So quite clearly she says that performative changes are natural. So natural what we pass off, what we consider as natural, what we consume is natural and always already contains the performative in it. In other words you can substitute the word performative with discursive, right. So the natural always already contains a discursive quality embedded in it, okay and you cannot possibly divorce the discursivity from the natural identity.

There is no natural identity which is not discursive in quality according to Butler. And then she comes back to the significance and the politics of parody and how parody to what extent is parody an important tool to foreground the artificiality, to foreground the performativity quality of identity, right. So parody becomes, the pastiche becomes a very important tool, a very important instrument that dramatizes and spectacularly makes visual the performative artificial quality of identity.

And she says quite clearly and this is on your screen over here. The practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between the privilege and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic, a failed copy as it were. So you know practices of parody can actually be used for status quo, practices of parody can actually sometimes consolidate this binary between a privileged naturalized gender configuration and a phantasmic you know phantasmatic and mimetic configuration, a failed copy as it were.

And if you remember she had said quite clearly and this is what we discussed in previous lecture and a couple of lectures before that as well where she said that any act of identification or any act of identity formation or production is basically an act of you know confirmation, is really conformed to something, is really conformed to certain code right and this act of conformation or conformity always ends up being an incomplete act, always ends up being a failed act.

But then she talks about how this failure or this incompleteness an act of conformity or conformation can actually contain a subversive potential. So this gap between the original and the mimetic, this gap can actually be a you know it can carry subversive potential, can carry radical possibilities which might question, which might open up the entire politics of gender and produce plural possibilities you know open up for further questions, further combinations, further permutations etc. okay.

And surely she goes on to say and surely parody has been used to further a politics of despair. One which affirms a seemingly inevitable exclusion of marginal genders from the territory of the natural and the real. So parody can be used as a politics of despair to further to extend the politics of despair which affirms the sort of inevitable conclusion exclusion of marginalized gender from the natural and the real.

So obviously when she says natural and real genders she is talking about actually about intelligible gender. So intelligible identities of gender which obviously fit in or approximate, not fit in but approximate the dominant codes of gender behavior, the dominant codes of gender identity and parody can be seen can be used as an instrument to further a division between this approximated intelligible identities of gender and the marginalized identities of sort of the other kinds of gender you know configurations and the drag being a good example of that kind of a parody.

And yet this failure to become real and to embody the natural is I would argue a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally are uninhabitable. So it is a very key issue that she is raising, a very key definition, a very key sort of description that she is saying that this ontological locales, this

ontologically determined identities, this ontologically privileged identities are fundamentally are uninhabitable, right.

You cannot actually inhabit, you cannot actually occupy, you cannot actually ontologize yourself perfectly in this gender norms. So every act of failure, the failure to conform, the failure to become real, the failure to become natural is actually a very common failure according to Butler and she says this failure becomes spectacular in certain kinds of gender identities just the homosexual, the drag, the lesbian identities where this failure the so called failure to conform to the dominant code becomes spectacular, becomes visible become so very foregrounded.

However, she says even within the “normative” heterosexual matrix there too there is a failure to conform to the you know the ontological locale, the ontological privilege identity because you know this is actually the ontology which is a construct, it is a fantasy right and you cannot really conform to the fantasy completely.

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ized identities? Just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself.

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic—a failed copy, as it were. And surely parody has been used to further a politics of despair, one which affirms a seemingly inevitable exclusion of marginal genders from the territory of the natural and the real. And yet this failure to become “real” and to embody “the natural” is, I would argue, a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable. Hence, there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic

So you know these ontological locales this sort of ontologized identities are fundamentally uninhabitable. You cannot really inhabit those fundamentally, you cannot inhabit those completely, right. So there is always the slippage, there is always this failure, there is always this gap between the dominant desirable identity and the real experiential identity of the gender okay.

So hence there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche effect of parody practices in which the original the authentic and the real are themselves constitute as effects.

So again with battles question of subversive laughter, right. So this subversive laughter is produced when there is this pastiche effect, this hollowed out effect where the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects. So what happens in a case of certain kind of pastiche where the ontologically privileged identity, the ontologically authentic identity, the ontological real identity they themselves become effects.

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selves constituted as effects. The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: “man” and “woman.” The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an “act,” as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of “the natural” that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status.

I have tried to suggest that the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics, that is, deemed necessary in

They themselves become you know sort of objectives of parody, objectives of pastiche, objectives of division etc. those become the effects of parody, the effects of pastiche, right. So therein lies the true subversive laughter according to Butler, okay. The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations destabilizing substantive identity and depriving and the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists man and woman.

So you know this kind of a loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender identities and what this proliferation does. It destabilizes substantive identity, right. It destabilizes what is the ontologically privilege identity and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of the central protagonist man and woman. So this idea of

naturalizing narratives is very important because these are narratives which are naturalized through acts of repetition, through acts of ontologization etc.

But you know this kind, this kind of a pastiche where the loss of gender norms, the pastiche obviously is nonnormative in quality more often than not and this kind of a pastiche oftentimes proliferates certain kinds of configurations which denaturalizes the narratives of compulsory heterosexuality, right. So you know the whole idea of naturalizing this sort of compulsory heterosexuality is obviously the discursive act, right.

So discursive quality of these narratives lies precisely in the act of naturalization and also we talked about how naturalization and concealment go hand in hand. So on one hand you need to naturalize, you need to repeat certain kinds of discursive codes over and over again just where they become naturalized to the point of being unquestionable and equally and more importantly it is also important to conceal the constructed quality of those codes.

So you do not really find out these are codes which have been constructed through artificial discursive processes. But if you manage to conceal them then obviously they are it is more easy for you to pass them off as given, to pass them off as universal, totalizing categories right. But what this, this kind of a pastiche does. It deliberately become, makes the gender nonnormative and making gender nonnormative it denaturalizes those natural narratives which make heterosexuality compulsory, which make heterosexuality dominant discursive code for gender behavior.

That kind of a dominance, that kind of a legitimacy is delegitimized, denaturalized in acts of pastiche according to Butler. So the parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. So you know this is what Butler has been critical of so far throughout this particular thesis and that there is assumption of an interiority of gender.

This is an assumption of a prediscursive or nondiscursive interiority which according to Butler does not exist right. And what Butler says over here is quite radical and she says this acts of

repetition, this parodic repetition, not normative repetition but parodic repetition, what this parodic repetition this pastiche repetition does or do rather well is that it exposes the illusion of interiority.

The interiority this gender interiority, the sense of having a core self of gender, a core masculine self, a core feminine self, this particular illusion, this particular fantasy is exposed as an illusion, is exposed as a fantasy, how? By this parodic acts of repetition. So this acts of repetition are excessive in quality. This acts of repetition are obviously parodic, acts of repetition are excessive in quality, spectacular in quality hyperbolic in quality often times they are obviously taken together, they are nonnormative in quality.

So this nonnormativity of this parodic repetitions make them a sort of very well equipped to expose the the illusion of substance, the illusion of interiority, the illusion of real depth okay. And again this idea of depthlessness, this idea of the celebration of depthlessness that Butler is sort of doing over here, this idea of necessary you know superficiality being this organic condition, superficiality being this necessary condition you know anything apart from superficiality is a discursive you know investment.

This kind of an idea, this kind of a you know analysis allies Butler quite remarkably well with a postmodernist kind of working superficiality. Because in postmodernism too we have the sense of centerlessness. Center cannot hold. It opens up to plural possibilities. It denies depth, it decries any idea of interiority and obviously it delegitimizes any sort of depth based analysis right and that obviously is a very postmodern thing to do.

And this is something that Butler is doing over here as well. So as the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an act. This is what you know we have been talking about since the very inception of this, this very beginning of this kind of a text that we have been studying that we need to look at gender as an activity, as an act, as a verb right. So if we are to assign a part of speech to gender it will not be an adjective, it will rather be a verb.

Because it is an act, it is a process, it is an activity which is subversive in quality which is conforming in quality etc. depending on the human situation, depending on the sort of the order of embodiment at any given point of space and time, okay. So as a subtle so when gender occurs when gender emerges as a subtle and politically enforced performativity, it becomes an activity as it were that is open to splitting, self-parody, self-criticism and those hyperbolic exhibitions of the natural that in their very exaggeration reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status.

So hyperbole, exaggeration these become very strategic maneuvers in this kind of a gender identity which is produced through performativity. So Butler says over here that you know when you look at gender as some kind of a parodic repetition, as some kind of a parodic performance, parodic performativity. We need to sort of take into account that this kind of an activity is hyperbolic in quality. Is deliberately designed to be exaggerated.

Is deliberately designed to be hyperbolic and this sense of hyperbole, this sense of exaggeration what it does very well according to Butler is that it reveals its fundamentally phantasmatic status. So it reveals the fantasy of interiority. It reveals the fantasy of ontological origin. It reveals the fantasy of depth. It reveals the fantasy of substance. So this acts of parodic repetition it hollows out the idea of gender over and over again.

So parody or pastiche over here especially when it corresponds to gendered performance the way that Butler studies it through self-parody, splittings, opening up etc. and that becomes obviously acts of deconstruction, dramas of deconstruction you might say and those dramas of deconstruction what it does is that it really opens up, it exposes the hollowness, the entire sort of fantasy, the entire myth the entire unreality about real gender.

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I have tried to suggest that the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics, that is, deemed necessary in order to mobilize feminism as an identity politics, simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up. The tacit constraints that produce culturally intelligible “sex” ought to be understood as generative

The entire you know reality about gender being some kind of a core substance, some kind of a core substance with depth with interiority etc. that is exposed as a myth, that is exposed as a fantasy according to these particular performances by and through these particular performances, okay.

So and then she goes on to say, I have tried to suggest that the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics that is deemed necessary in order to mobilize feminism as an identity politics simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up. So she has said this before and she is sort of obviously repeating what she had said summarizing in a more condensed form.

And then she says one needs to be careful while looking at the identity politics on feminism because sometimes, oftentimes these identity politics they end up being entrapped in the same kind of patriarchal discourse which is supposed to question, right and this happens when Butler you know Butler says, Butler analyses whenever there is a totalizing and universalizing tendency in these identity politics. So these identity politics seem to be carefully maneuvered with, right.

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You know these are necessitated to mobilize feminism etc. However, the same identity politics sometimes work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up. In other words what she is saying over here is there is this danger of being dogmatic. There is this danger of being you know embedded in a closure, right. So this identity politics sometimes sort of they they end up being a closure which does not open up to other cultural possibilities offered other points of historical space and time, okay.

So the tacit constraints that produce culturally intelligible sex ought to be understood as generative political structures rather than naturalized foundations. So this is a binary. This is this is what she is questioning. So rather than looking at these kind of tacit constraints sort of mutually agreed constraints of gender and gender identities or gender performativity, rather than looking at these constraints as naturalized foundations, as biologically true givings.

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Rather than looking at it from a sort of determinist standpoint we need to understand, we need to analyze and examine these things as generative political structures or artificially designed or creative political structures right. So rather than looking at it as a natural foundation we need to understand these as or examine these as artificially produced or artificially engineered discursive structures and political structures okay.

So paradoxically the reconceptualization of identity as an effect that is as produced or generated opens up possibilities of agency that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. So this is again a very radical thing that Butler is saying over and she says quite clearly that true agency can only come with a recognition of artificiality. True agency can only come, can only emerge with the recognition of discursivity right.

So as long as you recognize, acknowledge and address the sort of discursivity around you, the artificiality around you, the constructed quality of life, the constructed quality of language, the constructed quality of embodiment around you only then can you produce true agency. So true agency cannot come from identities which are foundational and fixed, right.

So you know you cannot really say I have agency, according to Butler you cannot really say I have agency because I happen to be a woman, a real woman, a real man with inner substance which is masculine in quality and you know I shall derive my agency from my interiority which

is masculine or feminine in quality. If you say that obviously you will get trapped in foundational categories according to Butler.

And these foundational categories foreclose any possibility of agency. So agency can only emerge by positions in discursive conditions, right, by maneuvering some discursive condition, by engaging with discursive conditions at different points of time, okay. So for an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. So there is a liminality in identity formation.

So it is neither fatally biologically determined neither is it fully artificial or arbitrary, right. And so therein lies again we sort of back to saying what we have been sort of defining from the beginning of this particular course that there is an entanglement between organicity and artificiality right, between interiority and you know externality. Between sort of materiality and abstraction. So it is neither totally material neither is it totally abstract.

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work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up. The tacit constraints that produce culturally intelligible “sex” ought to be understood as generative political structures rather than naturalized foundations. Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of “agency” that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. That the *constituted* status of identity is misconstrued along these two conflicting lines suggests the ways in which the feminist discourse on cultural construction remains trapped within the unnecessary binarism of free will and determinism. Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and

So identity should be seen as a liminal condition, as a threshold condition negotiating or maneuvering between artificiality you know arbitrary artificiality one might say and fatally determined quality, right. So neither is it totally biologically determined neither is it arbitrarily artificial. So it is somewhat between the two, somewhat negotiating between these 2 categories you know in a very liminal kind of a way.

That the constituted status of identity is misconstrued along these two conflicting lines suggests the ways in which the feminist discourse on cultural construction remains trapped within the unnecessary binarism of free will and determinism, right. So there should be an escape from this binary between free will and determinism. So neither is identity completely free will neither is identity completely deterministic in quality.

So there is no such thing as pure free will and there is no such thing as pure determinism, right. So there is this and this acknowledgment of impurity, this acknowledgment of entanglement is what makes identity process or identity politics possible in the first place, okay. And next she gives a really radical statement which I think so is one of those statements which stand out in this entire text where she says that construction is not opposed to agency.

So construction is not the ontological opposite of agency. But rather it is a necessary scene of agency. The very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. So it is only through construction, it is only through discursivity that agency can be articulated. So you cannot really derive agency by being prediscursive or being nondiscursive because then you know you do not get agency at all there. You get a myth, a fantasy of agency.

But true agency is not opposed to construction. True agency is not opposed to discursivity. Is only through dealing with discursivity, it is only through maneuvering with discursivity can one arrive to an articulation of agency. So agency can only be articulated through discursivity, through construction etc. You can only intelligibly articulate agency through a discursive process, not by escaping discursivity but rather by negotiating with discursivity, okay.

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fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. That the *constituted* status of identity is misconstrued along these two conflicting lines suggests the ways in which the feminist discourse on cultural construction remains trapped within the unnecessary binarism of free will and determinism. Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism

That is a very important thing that construction is not opposed to agency. It is one of the sentences which hopefully will stay with you as long as you are interested in critical theory as long as you are interested in cultural studies that construction is not opposed to agency, okay. It is a really beautifully written phrase as well. So the critical task for feminism under the circumstances is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities.

So that should not be the aim of feminism to look for a point of view outside the constructed identity. It is only within the constructed identities can we have a sense of agency, can we have you know an intelligible agency that can be articulated. That conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and hence promote itself as a global subject.

So you know that kind of a point of view where you look for agency outside of constructed identities that itself is an epistemological construct, okay. And that is a very important topic. This is a very important point that Butler is raising over here. So she is saying that this this attempt to look at agency, this attempt to look at identity outside the constructed categories, that attempt itself is a construct, right.

And it is a kind of construct which allies itself epistemologically speaking, it allies itself with this entire universalizing project, this entire totalizing project, the total global project etc. a

position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. So in other words to put it very bluntly what Butler is saying essentially over here is you know if we are looking for identities, if you are looking for agency outside the constructed categories then that kind of a model, that kind of an attempt in itself becomes a construct.

But it is a very sinister kind of a construct because it allies itself epistemologically to the universalizing tendency. And this same universalizing tendency, this same universalizing totalizing view point is exactly what inform imperialism and this is something that feminism ought to critique. In other words feminism must attempt not to become a grand narrative and this is exactly how grand narrative functions.

Every grand narrative looks for a sort of sense of legitimization or derives its legitimacy from a seemingly metadiscursive position you know something which is outside discourse. So I mean this is something I have said already in order for something, in order for discourse to become grand narrative in the first place it must assume a universalizing sort of dress, it must assume a universalizing rhetoric, right so that it does not get exposed as a construct in the first place.

So you know it is a very carefully concealed construct. So concealment again becomes very important but however, Butler says quite clearly over here that feminism ought to critique this kind of a tendency, right. It ought to critique any idea of a metadiscursive quality because everything through agency through identity through articulation through authority can only come from within the discursive field, so there is no outside the discursive field.

It is like the dividend statement, there is no outside of the text. It is always textural in quality, right. So every activity, every identity production, every act of articulation, every act of sort of you know agency etc. is part of a discursive field. There is no outside of a text. It is all a part of the textural process, right. So this textural performativity is something that what one has to be careful about all the time. There is nothing a textural. There is nothing nontextural about identity in the first place.

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ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.

This theoretical inquiry has attempted to locate the political in the very signifying practices that establish, regulate, and deregulate identi-

So the critical task, this is page 188 on your screen. The critical task is rather to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and therefore present the immanent possibility of contesting them. So the key words over here are local strategies.

To locate strategies of subversive repetition that enable those constructions. So from the local possibilities right. So the local possibilities obviously are sort of ontologically opposed to grand narratives. So local possibilities or local narratives micronarratives, right. And again we can go back and sort of draw on Lyotard over here and we find the remarkable resonance between Lyotard and Butler in terms of what they are saying over here.

In terms of cautioning us or cautioning feminist theorist against any kind of a totalizing tendency, any kind of a universalizing narrative which can become a grand narrative by default by extension, okay. So only through local possibilities of intervention, that is a very beautiful phrase, local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and therefore present the immanent possibility of contesting them. So what is to be contested over here you know is any idea for grand narrative.

Any idea for universalizing narrative, right. Any idea for metadiscursive narrative. So there is nothing called metadiscursive, there is nothing called nondiscursive narrative in the first place. So any claim at nondiscursivity should be contested and it can only be contested through local possibilities of intervention. So intervention can only come from local possibilities not from universalizing of grand possibilities of identity and agency, okay.

So I will stop this lecture here today. So we are just winding up with Butler and we will hopefully finish with her in another lecture but you know just go through the sections where we were studying, we have been looking at this particular you know conclusion very carefully. We are doing it line by line literally and that is because it is a very beautiful summary the entire book you know. We have obviously selected certain sections of that book in terms of examining her closely.

But the conclusion I think needs to be read carefully and in some details in order to glean what Butler is saying throughout this particular text which as I said is a very seminal text in terms of understanding the alliance between poststructuralism, postmodernism and gender politics and gender theory. So thank you for your attention and I will see you in the next lecture where we will continue with this particular text. Thank you.