



October 2023

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Recommended Citation

Levkovskaya, Valeria (2023) "Remaking the Possible: Intelligibility and Trans Autonomy," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1108>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol6/iss2/15>

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Remaking the Possible: Intelligibility and Trans Autonomy

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Published online: 4 June 2014
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Abstract

This essay explores problems inherent to Butler's concept of intelligibility as it is presented in her book *Undoing Gender*. By relegating gender minorities collectively to the unintelligible, Butler unintentionally diminishes the agency of gender minorities and their ability to produce themselves as subjects through oversights Butler makes with regard to the importance of embodiment. Accounts by transgender individuals and theorists, including objections to Butler's work itself, emphasize different ways that trans individuals legitimate their own approach to norms of intelligibility. In order to salvage Butler's notion of intelligibility, it is necessary to emphasize certain aspects and de-emphasize others. Through the work of various transgender thinkers, it is possible to emphasize the changing norms of intelligibility. Both discursively and through embodied experience, challenges are issued to the norm which undermine the terms of the norm itself. What results is recognition of how tenuous the norms of intelligibility are in and of themselves, and the necessity for a new ethic. This new ethic requires a position of deferral on the part of observers, which does not impose norms. Instead, each subject is allowed to determine through their discourse and the presentation of their embodiment how they will relate to the available norms.

In her book *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler brings to the fore the complexities and contradictions of gender as a lived practice and also a set of norms, especially as it relates to trans and queer lives. She highlights the concrete struggles of individuals and communities as they negotiate and legitimate their existences in the face of these norms. She moves between examinations of case studies and engagement with other feminist and queer theorists, and in so doing she attempts to resolve, or at least provide preliminary answers for, questions about autonomy, medical practice, theory and activism. What emerge in her investigation are norms of intelligibility, which highlight severe limits on the recognition of gender minorities, over and above those that are commonly discussed when gender identity and sexuality intersect with power, oppression and resistance. The limits that Butler identifies for intelligibility and

possibility supposedly apply to the wide spectrum of gender minorities as a whole. But by conflating the discursive status of a wide range of gender minorities, Butler runs the risk of foreclosing the expansion of those same norms and possibility by those same individuals when they develop their own ideas of trans theory and embodiment. The concern is that such a move would be tantamount to an unethical foreclosure of the autonomy of trans people. In order for Butler’s formulation of the norms of intelligibility and possibility to acknowledge the autonomy of gender minorities, and specifically trans people, it is necessary to emphasize the way that trans and queer embodiment can call into question the importance of the norms of intelligibility themselves, asserting in their place an ethics of *unintelligibility*. I will argue that Butler’s description of the norms of intelligibility and possibility for gender can discourage the development of autonomy, specifically for trans people. Then I will show how trans theorists and activists work to counteract that same reduction of autonomy through challenges to normative discourse. The same challenges issued by trans theory are then answered by Butler’s own analysis of gender identity disorder (GID), opening up an affirmation of specifically trans assertions of autonomy within the scope of possibility as Butler understands it. This affirmation implies an ethical relationship to trans people and gender minorities more generally which stresses an acknowledgment of the *unintelligible*.

Within the context of any work that attempts to discuss gender minorities, gender non-conforming practices and trans individuals, it is necessary to acknowledge that these discussions require a specialized kind of language that relies strongly on the choices and preferences of the author. That is, I have preferences about which terms are used in discussions about gender, and my choices follow from there. There are many terms that are available to address the wide range of gender non-conforming individuals, some of which are used to talk about gender minorities as a group and others which are meant to describe very particular experiences and identifications. Listing all of them with their decisions would be a somewhat improbably large task, and there are many excellent resources available that have dedicated themselves to that task specifically. As such, I would like to explain only the particular choices I make here, with special emphasis on the controversial nature of all these words. The general definitions I offer here could be very different to those used by another thinker interested in gender, or could be completely outdated within a few years. My term of choice, “trans” is often included under the common umbrella term “trans*.” While trans* seeks to encompass an extremely wide range of gender non-conforming individuals and practices, trans refers primarily to those who are actively transitioning medically, or have completed their planned course of medical transition. This focus on transitioned/transitioning individuals lends the discussion specificity. It is necessary for discussing particular kinds of embodiment, and the way that embodiment is connected to the discourse surrounding norms and intelligibility, especially with regard to Butler.

Butler sets up her notion of intelligibility by putting it in contrast to the rhetoric of oppression. She writes:

“To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible . . . is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always *as if you were* human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor.”¹

This account of unintelligibility is addressed to gender minorities generally,² setting them apart from intelligible but oppressed gay and lesbian people. In this instance, the exclusion that Butler describes seems absolute, precluding the possibility for gender minorities to find legitimation in the discourse which purports to describe the genuine human. While the norms of intelligibility cannot include gender minorities, individuals who identify as a gender minority are still obligated to use the terms of normative discourse. The terms of the norm obscured the existence of alternative possible discourses, and in so doing bound the limits of what can be understood as human. The result is a kind of dissonance between a person’s sense of themselves and the insufficiency of the language available with which to articulate themselves. This analysis of the norms of intelligibility has a certain practice truth: norms and the attendant discourses by nature can only acknowledge a limited range of possibilities. However, such an approach obscures the creative autonomy of those who would treat norms as mutable or permeable, who expand the possibilities attendant to those norms by exploiting the complexity of those same norms in their practices of gender.

It is important to note that these practices are not necessarily discursive. But in Butler’s formulation of intelligibility, “speaking” and “language” are necessary to make one real, implying that the entrance of gender minorities into the field of the human is predicated on their ability to participate in discourse. However, trans activists challenge this necessity through practices that make themselves real through embodiment as well as discourse. Marie-Hélène Bourcier, in her article “‘F***’ the Politics of Disempowerment in the Second Butler,” argues that “By not taking into consideration the empowering character of certain forms of embodiment . . . we run the risk of undoing a myriad of trans possibilities and missing the multiplicity of ways in which genders are done.”³ She specifically attributes to Butler a failure to recognize the value of the work done by trans people as gender minorities. Embodiment becomes a way to

¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004). 30

² *Ibid.*, 29

³ Marie-Hélène Bourcier, “‘F***’ the Politics of Disempowerment in the Second Butler,” (*Paragraph* 35, no. 2 July 2012), 240

open the field of intelligibility in particular ways which would not necessarily be possible with discourse alone. This indicates that there is something special about the body, at least for trans theorists, that allows it to do things and make meaning in a way that language cannot.

Butler herself seems partially aware of her oversight with regard to embodiment, or at least she is aware that that oversight is a possibility. In reflecting on her own writing, she notes: “Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language. This is not because I think that the body is reducible to language; it is not. . . . The body is that upon which language falters, and the body carries its own signs, its own signifiers . . .”⁴ In the case of intelligibility, it is clear that Butler did not attempt to discuss embodiment. Any description of embodiment or its role in determining norms is missing from her description of intelligibility. So what this acknowledgment does, then, is show that Butler can be made to address the concerns about disempowerment that Bourcier brings up, but only indirectly. Given that Butler believes that certain kinds of signification are particular to and only possible through the body, it follows that trans embodiment makes possible a kind of resignifying work that language cannot do. Clearly, there must be consequences for the field of intelligibility, which Butler does not address directly, which is why her work must be examined for those indirect acknowledgements. That said, it is more appropriate to turn to those trans theorists who do stress the possibilities contingent on embodiment first in order to understand what that approach might look like.

In “Transgenderism and the Question of Embodiment,” Patricia Elliot and Katrina Roen show the key role that embodiment has played in resignification through a survey of trans and queer theorists, which was then paired with one-on-one interviews with trans individuals. What emerged are a few dominant themes for how trans people conceive of themselves, demand recognition from others, and expand on or add to the language available to them in order to make themselves visible. Throughout, Elliot and Roen emphasize the shared desire among trans people that their particular “sexed embodiments,” in all their variability, diversity and mutability be treated with recognition and respect. That demand, particularly for recognition, flies in the face of norms of intelligibility that can preclude access to recognition in any discursive or practiced way. Elliot and Roen note that trans people, as individuals with particular embodiments, are prolific in producing new terms and stretching the definitions of old ones in order to accommodate the specificity of their lives.⁵ What results are new possibilities for intelligibility that are both embodied and discursive. The discourse arises from bodies, but sometimes about the bodies itself is not captured in those times.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004). 198

⁵ Patricia Elliot and Katrina Roen, “Transgenderism and the Question of Embodiment,” (*GLQ: A Journal Of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 April 1998), 245

Nonetheless, from within their own communities and vocabularies, trans people are already demanding and finding recognition for their embodiments and their discourse. If recognition is predicated on the ability to be understood within the norms of intelligibility, then trans people have empowered themselves to remake those norms in their own image. They are not condemned to the impossible. Instead, by embracing the particularity of their own embodiment, they render those norms elastic. In some cases, the expansion of norms exposes or creates an obvious incoherence within the norm itself.

The incoherence comes from a distinct willingness among trans people to take up notions of sex, body and gender in ways that can seem contradictory or unstable in the face of traditional binary or crossing-over narratives of transition and gendered life.⁶ These contradictions are gleefully encouraged as part of the norm itself. This willingness on the part of trans people to abandon any strict adherence to gendered norms empowers trans people to see possibilities for themselves beyond what is traditionally proscribed under the norms of intelligibility. The work done by trans people to make norms flexible in their own lives also contributes to a more expansive experience of norms for other gender minorities, and even cisgender and gender conforming individuals. Of course, even when this discursive autonomy merges with the field of the intelligible, trans people must still struggle to assert that autonomy in medical and legal practices. In her analysis of GID, Butler explicitly deals with that problem of autonomy, which she handily names transautonomy.⁷ The flexibility that was lacking in her discussion of gender minorities as a whole is very present in this essay. She recognizes the kind of creative embodied and discursive work done by trans people as an expression of transautonomy. She describes the practices which trans children use to understand their own embodiment as “an art practice at work here, one that would be difficult to name, simply, as the simple act of conforming to a norm. Something is being made, something is being made from something else, something is being tried out.”⁸ The creative nature of the art practice establishes transautonomy as something which exceeds norms, and often makes something new either from the norms themselves or beyond what those norms can grasp. The work of transautonomy seems so much oriented around altering the norms such that they become almost unrecognizable, completely unlike what they would be in a prescriptive binary discourse. Of course, the entire essay on GID complicates that account, describing it as process of submitting to discourse in such a way that trans people “purchase one sort of

⁶ Patricia Elliot and Katrina Roen, “Transgenderism and the Question of Embodiment,” (*GLQ: A Journal Of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 April 1998), 250

⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004). 76

⁸ *Ibid.*, 96

freedom only by giving up another.”⁹ The ability to achieve the embodiment which is so productive for trans individuals and so important to transautonomy requires submitting to a medical discourse that cannot account for that same autonomous, creative expansion of discourse of norms in general. It is important to recognize these particular difficulties when it comes to achieving the material and medical preconditions for trans embodiment, but when it comes to the norms of intelligibility, more can be understood by focusing on the implications for intelligibility once those obstacles have been surmounted. The kinds of challenges made to the norm can be different, depending on whether trans individuals and communities have the opportunity to realize their embodiment once those preconditions have been satisfied.

As has been well established by this point, trans embodiment does profound work in making norms versatile, creating space for within norms for acknowledgement of a wide variety of gender minorities beyond those included in specifically trans discourse. It follows that other kinds of gender minorities would also be able to contribute to this plurality of understandings of norms. This implies that to have a comprehensive understanding of norms which accounts for all the gender variation at play in the newly expanded discourse would be unfeasible. Instead of trying to think how each person interacts with norms of intelligibility in their specificity, it would be more fitting to acknowledge that the norms are in and of themselves complex, mutable and versatile. Under the new norms of intelligibility, it would be impossible to conclusively describe any given individual within a particular norm, because they are so expansive, and embody a certain measure of incoherence or contradiction. Instead, to meet another person ethically and offer them recognition would mean acknowledging that there are limits to what can be known about how that particular person fits within available gender norms. The terms of intelligibility do not account for a person in their full complexity. In order to acknowledge the complexity of any given gender minority group’s practices, either in terms of embodiment and discourse, means adopting an attitude of epistemic humility.¹⁰ This is the ethical mode that Paula Cameron proposes to complement the ethical turns in *Undoing Gender*. She describes it as “a site of silence and hesitation, physical and emotional wounds and ruptures, a space in which construction and destruction are held together in constant tension.”¹¹ In a discursive engagement, to be silent and to hesitate is a way of deferring action, in favor of allowing the other room in which to render themselves, intelligibly or not. Insofar as trans embodiment is critical for trans discourse, the physical ruptures which are literalized in the body of the transautonomous subject break down norms in such a way that tensions are inevitable. The making and straining of norms through that discourse

⁹ Ibid., 91

¹⁰ Paula Cameron, “Curriculum Vitae: Embodied Ethics at the Seams of Intelligibility,” (*Hypatia* 27, no. 2 Spring 2012) 432

¹¹ Ibid., 433

requires an ethical stance on the part of the observer, the person who sees but does not presume to know the body. This stance is a deferral of judgment that leaves the discursive field open for the subject to live out their tensions and norms in whatever way that individual sees fit. From the perspective of the academic or the theorist, the ethical thing to do is make room within discursive norms for those subjects to live out their tensions without trying to render those tensions down to something which is intelligible to the theorist. What is, from the subject's point of view, a new kind of intelligibility, may never be wholly clear to the academic as outsider or observer. To embrace difference is to make room for what looks like unintelligibility, and recognize that those unknowable qualities are the site of autonomy.

In order to achieve an ethical acknowledgement of unintelligibility, it is first necessary to understand what is at stake in a formulation of intelligibility that precludes the autonomy of particular gender minorities. When trans subjects take up the norms of intelligibility through their practices of embodiment and discourse, what emerges is a way of thinking about norms and intelligibility and recognition which is very particular to those same embodiments. There are moments where Butler's text cannot account for the importance either of particularity among gender minority or embodiment, and it limits the autonomy of trans subjects. But other moments, especially her reading of *GID*, produce an account of intelligibility which includes a genuine desire to engage with the complications that those particular features of transautonomy impose on the norms of intelligibility. By choosing to draw from those moments in Butler, and the expansive, complex forms of norms which follow, it is possible to see in *Undoing Gender* the outlines of an ethics of unintelligibility, which is characterized by patience, and a willingness to listen. It is those ethical features that make intelligibility into something which can affirm the autonomy of gender minorities in their specificity.

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