‘I, Robot?’ Or how Transgender Subjects are Dehumanised.

Saoirse Caitlin O’Shea

In this essay I focus on the earlier works of Judith Butler to discuss her understanding of gender theory and moreover do so in relation to people who are transgender. Transgender folk are important to Butler's early work but I contend that her allegorical use of them does not do justice to their precarious lives. I relate my discussion to existing work in organizational studies concerned both with Butler and trans folk and argue that Butler's concept of performativity should be (re)read alongside her other concerns with embodiment and universality to argue that, at least in relation to transgender folk, her work needs to be extended to consider issues of dysphoria in order to explain why some gender identities are refused and made abject.

- **Transgender.**
- **Transsexual.**
- **Transphobia.**
- **Cyborgs, androids and robots.**
- **Judith Butler, performativity and materialisation.**
- **Dysphoria and embodiment.**

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2017 was not a good year to be transgender in the UK. The UK media printed a lot of transphobic articles and from October did so at the rate of at least 1 per day (Barker 2017). The long awaited revisions to the Gender Recognition Act was ‘kicked in to the long grass’ (Duffy 2017) meaning that transgender people still do not have the right to self-identification. From my personal perspective things did not seem to get any worse but equally no better than previous years. In 2017 one of my friends and her girlfriend were violently assaulted and hospitalised; another committed suicide. I have lost a friend to suicide every year since 2014; whilst internet sites like TDoR document the horrific extent of transphobic murders annually what tends to be glossed are the horrific

number of suicides. I was on the receiving end of verbal abuse regularly and sometimes physical and sexual assault albeit nothing that required a hospital visit in 2017, unlike previous years. I lost count of the incidents of name calling, finger pointing, stupid comments early in the year as there were so many. But I get up and go out in public each day despite knowing that I may well be the victim of verbal abuse, or worse, that day. And I will repeat this every single day for the rest of my life. That's the thing you do to survive if you're transgender – you pretend. You pretend that being called a 'freak' for the 987th time no longer hurts, and you weren't fazed by the idiots who spat in your face, or by the women how grabbed your crotch 'to check'. You pretend you have no feelings and none of this hurts, ever. You pretend to be a robot just to survive. And if you cannot? Suicide? The suicide rate for trans people is shockingly high. I see my NHS gender consultant 4 times a year and each time I'm asked about suicidal ideation, sometimes I lie. I'm a non-binary trans person 4 years in to my NHS 'transition' - I, robot?

In this essay I consider how the lives of many transgender folk are made unliveable in a heterosexual matrix that dehumanises non-conforming genders. It is particularly important that we consider this now as more and more people identify as transgender annually. This increase in numbers will result in more unliveable lives until we reconsider gender. I thus add my voice to, and challenge some, organizational research concerned with the experiences of transgender folk in in organizational studies (Brewis et al. 1997; Schilt 2006; Schilt and Connell 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Thanem 2011; Thanem and Knights 2012; Pullen and Rhodes 2013; Thanem and Wallenberg 2015) and with gender more widely through a critical consideration of Judith Butler's early work in relation to the lived experiences of transgender folk.

Before continuing I should make clear that I am a non-binary transsexual person and the empirical accounts, italicised for clarity, are autobiographical. Riach, Rumens and Tyler (2016, 2072. See also Scheman 1997), following Butler, call for a 'reflexive undoing' to reveal a 'the consequences of mis-recognition for those who don't fit'. My experiences reveal issues of mis-recognition and resulting dehumanisation and abjection that may be common to the precarity of many transgender lives. That we live and die unliveable lives is not an academic abstraction but the brute reality of an often transphobic contemporary society (Whittle et al. 2007; Grant et al. 2011; James et al. 2016) little changed in the last decade despite media hype surrounding a small, select group of transgender media celebrities and the much vaunted transgender 'tipping point' (Steinmetz 2014).

A friend recently posted on Facebook asking if any of her 1200 or so UK based friends wanted to reveal the worst example of transphobia they had faced. (Many of those 1200 do not identify as transgender.) In the 2 hours immediately after more than 130 transgender individuals shared their often horrific stories. Amongst the expressions of sympathy many more chose only to say they too had similar experiences. Transphobia exists and the lives of transgender folk not protected by fame or fortune are often made unliveable. Tipping point, what tipping point?

This essay will start by briefly summarising Pullen and Rhodes (2013) discussion of a cartoon robot forced to cross dress as representative of transgender lives and gender transgression. I offer a nuanced reading of Butler's early work to consider both if Butler preferences drag at the cost of others and furthermore if the metaphor of a robot represents a dehumanisation of some transgender lives. Without wishing to be trite I intend to question why some transgender bodies seem to matter whilst others do

not by putting Butler's work in to practice to examine how well it explains an unliveable life.

I, Robot

Sandy Stone (1991) relates how a transphobic gender critical academia has used robots and other unnatural things as metaphors for transgender folk. Stone is not alone in her concern with how a robot is symbolically yoked to the reality of transgender folk and our lives - in organization studies Pullen and Rhodes (2013) discuss a cartoon robot forced to cross dress as the theme of an episode of *Futurama*. They argue that this allegorisation of transgender reveals how gender is done and undone in a Butlerian sense. I will not critique Pullen and Rhodes analysis of that programme –I neither have a TV nor access to a stable, fast internet connection to 'watch again' so have never seen the episode that they discuss – but ask if a cartoon robot metaphorically dehumanises transgender lives and preferences a gender representation over performativites.

Pullen and Rhodes (2013) draw on Judith Butler to argue that *Futurama*'s robot who routinely performs a hyper-masculine, macho gender role is forced in the episode they examine to transgress the heterosexual matrix by being sissified. In apparent keeping with Butler gender is not based on the presumption of the 'realness' of a sexed body but a gender performativity so evident that it leads them to use masculine pronouns 43 times in reference to the robot. Robots are however machines without psychic depth (there is no 'ghost in the shell') and commonly lack genitalia; a cartoon is a depthless image drawn and animated by the cartoonist. A cartoon robot – indeed any cartoon figure including the cartoon alien read as female by Pullen and Rhodes (2013) - does not perform gender so much as represents, repeats and through which we may read

the cartoonist's and our own understanding of gender. In a Butlerian sense the cartoon robot may allegorise gender but there is no performativity *because* there is neither psychic depth nor a body that matters.

Do transgender folk perform, do and undo gender or do we merely represent it? Are our bodies mere depthless screens upon which gender plays out but where our bodies and lives matter very little? These seemingly trite questions take on some weight when we consider that transgender folk are often only discussed in allegorical terms by many theorists including Butler. What does it mean if (cartoon) robots allegorise transgender folk and to be so dehumanised? Robots considered in contemporary culture to be soulless, unfeeling automatons often opposed to human existence, seem particularly apposite to a discussion on dehumanisation, abjection and exclusion.

Do androids dream of post-human futures?

Robots, androids and cyborgs seem to be almost interchangeable in the public's imagination but the three are different. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries robots once made to perform onerous, repetitive and often dangerous tasksⁱ now seemingly represent to many a dystopian future of mass human unemployment (Mason 2017): robots are now soulless, unfeeling mechanical objects alien to humanity and to be feared.

Androids are a specific type of robot that imitate human form: all androids are robots but not all robots are androids. The first android in Western culture as recounted in the Greek myths of Hesiod was Pandora (Marder 2014). Pandora, the first woman, was an artificial construct made and sent in to the male world by the command of Zeus to take fire away from men by means of trickery, seduction and beguilement. Pandora released an invisible evil on the world of men in the form of 'automata' ... 'the very

germ of human life' (392). Modern humans when traced back to these 'automata' have always been androids.

Haraway (1991) described a cyborg, 'a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine' (Haraway 1991, 10 and 148. See also Ball 2005; Czarniawska and Gustavsson 2008; and Muhr 2011) as a potential post-human form that maintains a core humanity but with enhanced bio-engineered abilities. Cyborgs, unlike robots and androids, retain a psychic depth within a metal, plastic and flesh composite form to possess a 'ghost in the shell'.

This distinction is pertinent given that many of us invest in body transformations including piercings, tattoos, aesthetic implants, staples or plates, brandings or scarifications (Atkinson 2003; Holliday and Sanchez Turner 2006; MacCormack 2006), or undergo aesthetic amputation (Sullivan 2008; Crawford 2015), as modes of personal body and identity alteration that question the impermeability of a body surface (see the discussion below of the 'variable surface' in Butler [1999]). Human lifespan may be extended through organ transplant, the implanting of a mechanical device, or the replacement of an organic part with a prosthetic (Sharp 2011; Crawford 2015). The more radical a body modification the more obvious one displays a 'morphological freedom' from the original organism and the more obvious we become cast as cyborgs, a '*body immortal* by turning the 'flesh' into a modular, fragmented system' (Rossini 2003: 5 emphasis in original).

One of my concerns in writing this essay is to consider Judith Butler's argument that we are self-alienated fractured products of temporal normative organization, of which gender is a significant one. It is not without irony then that I ask why transgender people are so often vilified in contemporary society? Is it because we are regarded as fragmented beings – a fragmentation definitional of the post-human cyborg (Shildrick

1999; Rossini 2003) - whose sense of self does not align with an external, visible body morphology to leave us alienated from our very selves? Or is it because we are regarded as never having had any humanity, mere robots without feelings that cannot change and threaten both the present and future of gender (Grosz 1994)? Are transgender folk dangerous unfeeling robots alien to humanity or post-human cyborgs? Why does gender and some bodies matter but others do not? These questions are reflected in Butler's concerns with gender and I will now discuss her early concern with performativity and psychic depth.

The bodies that matter

Judith Butler's work is often cited in management and organizational studies literature concerned with gender perhaps because it offers a critique of a heterosexual matrix that naturalises certain rigid notions of sex/gender as normative. Despite her apparent *de rigueur* presence surprisingly few however consider how her early work might help an understanding of (transgender) bodies and fewer still concern themselves with the braiding of gender performativity and psychic depth.

Butler's concept of gender performativity has developed, and continues to develop, and is somewhat more nuanced than those that reduce it to trite cliché suggest. My concern is with how this early work deploys some transgender identities to critique the heterosexual matrix specifically in terms of a universalised normative 'cissexuality' (Beasley, Holmes and Brook 2015). To demonstrate this I first consider what performativity 'is' and second the materiality of the subject in relation to a universalising of gender. Both are central to Butler's work (McNay 1999) and interrelate in order to question how gender and the subject are constituted and affected

by the sedimentation and reiteration of norms (Butler 1993: 10) and so may be used to further understand how a precarious life may unintentionally be made more precarious.

Universalising gender and performativity in a cissexual heterosexual matrix

In her early works up to and including *Gender Trouble* Butler makes use of Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault in interesting ways to argue that one becomes one's gender. Sex/gender should not be thought of in an essentialist manner because gender is performative (Butler 1993, 33) where gender performativity is less a single, deliberate act but rather a reiterative and citational productive practice (2) through which the subject is created through acts of interpellation (225). The subject is thus constituted and conditioned but not determined by, or merely situated in, history: 'it emerges along with history' (Barthold 2014, 809). This dynamic subject is not fully determined but instead comes in to being through rework and a resignifying process (Butler 1992, 13). These processual subjects do not align with an original intent but 'effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible' (Butler 1999, 39); performativity increases the scope of the heterosexual matrix and a cissexually normative society and, how gender is understood. Gender identity is 'tenuous', open to change and question because performativity is a repetition that 'calls into question the regulatory practice of identity itself' (42).

Up to this point one may clearly see how Butler's concept of gender is often understood and presented within management discourse as a discursive, repeated performativity, that helps co-constitute the subject in such a way that sex is collapsed in to gender and where the former is no longer an essentialist basis of the latter. Judith Butler's concern is not only with how gender is performative however but also how a never fully resolved physical body is subject to desire and where sex is not coterminous

with genitalia (1999, 175). How then does she understand bodies that matter as sexed embodiment?

In *Gender Trouble* Butler's (1999) understanding of embodied sex relies heavily on psychoanalytic theory and in particular Freud's concern with melancholia, the Oedipal complex and taboos against both incest and homosexuality, and the bodily ego to consider how heterosexuality and binary anatomically sexed bodies become normative and non-heterosexual desire is repressed. (Jay Prosser's [1998] critiques Butler's interpretation of Freud and may be read alongside Salamon's [2004 and 2010] critique of Prosser.)

For Butler the prohibitive repression of homosexuality precedes the taboo on incest and subsequently the formation of the heterosexual matrix and 'literalises sex on the (heterosexual) body' (Prosser 1998, 38. See also Butler 1999, 87). The body as such is a site of psychic projection of prohibitions where the original intent and meaning may no longer be understood or apply (Butler 1993, 64): erotic sensations, desires and their repression become associated with specific erogenous zones in a way that sex (and gender) becomes synonymous with the presence (or 'lack') of a penis. This surface is however not just a blank screen on to which the internal psyche is projected, it is also one that is interpreted through and may reflect social gender norms. Here internal and external projections align as a normative body or collide as non-normative bodies. (A cartoon robot is a screen for external projections only.) We thus come to experience the 'fact' of binary anatomical bodies because of the operation of both a repressive heterosexual symbolic realm where heterosexual binary gender is idealised through an embodiment and also by the universalisation of particular norms of masculinity or femininity (Butler 1993, 231-232) and the repressive potential of those norms.

Judith Butler (1999) first raised the issue of a universality of feminism in the opening chapter of *Gender Trouble* to argue against a representational politics that helps constitute a supposedly stable subject which it claims only to represent. Butler's argument is not the same as a concern with what might be described as a critique of 'man as the universal human' that grounds some concepts of feminist theory (see also Haraway 1991, 127-148) but to consider how an unreflexive acceptance of a binary heterosexual matrix does not question patriarchy and misogyny and does not undo heterosexual society (Riach, Rumens and Tyler 2016). This argument structures many of her works concerned with a theoretical-political explanation of subjects and precarious life.

For Butler the issue is to consider gender without sliding into a representation of 'women' that unreflexively repeats gender norms (Butler 1999, 9) and where attempts to extend a gender by including 'variegated amplifications ... risks a repetition... colonizing under the sign of the same those differences that might otherwise call that totalizing concept into question' (18): extending the range of male/masculinities and female/femininities does not undo but instead increases the scope of the binary heterosexual matrix. Butler moves on to argue that instead of assuming there is a universal, stable subject we should instead adopt a universalism that recognises the unity of the subject as incomplete, contested, always permanently deferred (Butler 1999, 19-24 and particularly 22. Butler alludes to gender as a Derridean *différance*.ⁱⁱ) and where 'the body in motion' helps reveal the temporal performativity of gender such that we are always becoming and inhabiting our gender.

To particularise bodies in motion only in terms of differences and 'variegated amplifications' presumes that there is a universal heterosexual subject and an original unity of gender. For Butler sex/gender and the category of sex presume a

‘generalisation of the body’ (1999: 164) where the supposedly passive, inert, motionless body operates as a spatially stable foundation for compulsory sexuality shaped and maintained strategically in order to naturalise normative sex/gender (170). The stable spatial body is presumed to be discrete from other bodies and to be reliant on a skin surface that is a permeable boundary between a hidden interiority (or ‘self’) and an observable exterior. Butler takes up Kristeva’s concept of the abject and Mary Douglas’s argument about pollution and purity to argue that hypostatisation permits the interior ‘self’ to identify, reject and expel what it does not identify with as unwanted and other to itself: ‘Others become shit’ (Butler 1999, 170. See also Butler 1993, 172 and 232) as the body’s surface acts as a porous and politicised boundary that both separates and forms the individual and/from others (Butler 1999, 177).

Expulsion as an act of exhaustion of what is excess to a ‘self’ is always incomplete since a residue remains left behind. (Exhaustion means both something is drained out of the body and that the body is tired out in doing so. Here the body is tired out before it succeeds in evacuating all excess. Butler’s reference to the supplement suggests that she also takes up this meaning.) This residue or *supplement* is always inferred by any claim to an identity and importantly means that the ‘self’ is never a complete, coherent, perfect whole (Butler 1999, 182) imbricating the impossibility of Hegelian concepts of societal improvement as an attempt to recover a lost coherence (Author 2002. See also Butler 1987).

Having established how sex/gender operates to normalise a binary heterosexual matrix Butler goes further to consider how performativity might expand that matrix despite potential sanction. Gender as ‘a *corporeal* style’ (Butler 1993, 177, emphasis in original. See also Butler 1993, 234) becomes a means where the goal of the abject is a precarious cultural survival in a naturalised binary heterosexual matrix mired in

sedimented normative processes. If one's self-embodiment is not acceptable within society, if one 'becomes shit', abject, marginal, excluded, unspeakable, illegitimate (Butler 1993, 84) then one's lived life is not just an alteration of the physical materiality of that embodiment but a constant work to question and undo those repressive regulations to give a meaning to a life despite 'punishments for not doing gender right' (Butler 1989, 255). Whilst this is to some extent the work of all subjects (Butler 2004b) the transgender subject is potentially the example par excellence in both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* as a site of abjection. I now wish to argue that Butler tends however to valorise a particular transgender subject and their particular performativity – that of drag (1999, 163 and 175-177; 1993, 124-140 and 230-242).

Why drag matters

In *Gender Trouble* drag, and to a lesser extent cross-dressing and butch/femme identities, is regarded as quintessential for understanding gender because it reveals the 'fantasy' of 'true gender' (Butler 1999, 174). Drag re-presents 'three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance' (Butler 1999, 175). Drag doesn't mimic an original, natural gender but reveals through exaggeration that the 'original' is itself a copy or fabrication. It is a 'pastiche-effect of parodic practices' (Butler 1999, 186. See also 176.), a copy of another copy rather than of an original. A binary heterosexual gender identity is thus just yet another copy rather than the original 'real' gender that marginalised genders and sexualities supposedly deviate from (Butler 1999, 186).

For Butler (1993, 235. See also 231-237 and 1999, 124-140 and 174-180) drag allegorises the binarised heterosexual matrix and 'real' gender to move from a critique of the universal (biologically sexed) subject in order to valorise and politicise a

universalised diversity. Butler questions how we are ‘produced’ as subjects of particular norms and also what it may mean to be de-produced and so ‘never get to enter into the process of being explicitly produced as subjects’ (Bell 2010, 133 quoting her interview with Butler) in a society that punishes gender non-conforming people (Butler 1989, 255; cf. Butler 2004a, chapter 2 and Butler 2001) but her choice of empirical subject – the gay male drag queen – allegorises rather than denies or refuses the heterosexual matrix.

Allegories of transgender folk and real accounts. Do some transgender bodies matter more than others?

Aged 5 I had two favourite toys: Tiggz, my one eyed tigress was hard bodied, stuffed with straw, fur nearly all but gone leaving faded orange and black stipes on a rough hessian skin; Pandi, by contrast, was soft to the touch and to cuddle, filled with foam that sometimes leaked out from a small hole between his legs in his otherwise anatomically neutral body. In the absence of any defining features I just knew that they were female and male. As a child this was obvious to me but as an adult I now seem to have mislaid the certainties and truth that I had then.

Christmas came and went and then on a cold February day a parcel arrived from my aunt in Hong Kong. Inside was a letter to my mum (not that I was interested), a present for my sister and one for me also (now I was interested). My sister’s new doll was rather unremarkable, different from the other dolls we shared only by its newness.

My present was a robot. A clockwork, tin robot made from square and rectangular boxes joined together in a loose approximation of a human form with little red eyes. When wound up it could supposedly walk and fire a small rocket from its chest. Wound up the robot however spent most of its time on its back, rotating crablike in circles having failed to maintain its balance during its shuffle-walk: the rocket was

quickly lost possibly fired horizontally at the furniture, or, much more likely, pointlessly ejaculated straight up in to space.

Fresh out of the box my mum was enthusiastic, 'Oh look a boy robot for you!'
Disinterest from me, 'It's not a boy. It's not a girl. It's a thing.'

Ungrateful and indifferent that first night I played with Pandi. The robot never captured my imagination and was soon consigned to a box in the attic, quickly forgotten and subsequently lost.

Butler's work argues against the 'truth' of a biologically sexed body based on genital morphology. Aged 5 I didn't know that genitalia (are supposed to) define sex/gender in a heterosexual matrix and cis-gender world. Nearly 50 years on sex/gender still confounds me; now just as then I am affected however by this 'truth' despite my ignorance.

This ignorance seems to be only mine, everyone else knows the truth of sex/gender: strangers in the street routinely 'sex' me with a single glance despite never seeing the genitalia that supposedly define my sex. The NHS diagnose me as a transsexual woman and ignore my self-identification as non-binary. (I don't want my penis so to them I must be a gender dysphoric transsexual woman!) They require I live as a transgender woman for 2 years post diagnosis in order to prove their diagnosis prior to any medical treatment. The UK Government make genital surgery a (nearly) mandatoryⁱⁱⁱ requirement before they will issue a gender reassignment certificate (GRC) and subsequent revised birth certificate. A GRC presumes a transition from one binary gender to the other and ignores that I am neither: non-binary is not an option and so I am erased; past, present and future. Then as now I do not understand why this truth is morphologically invested and written on my body as my hidden genitalia.

Butler's theory of gender is important for transgender folk not least because her arguments oppose the truth of genital morphology that invest cis-gender folk as real at the expense of us man-made, unnatural abominations (to paraphrase several transphobic academics). The mention of Judith Butler in transgender communities is often met however with a sharp intake of breath, 'tutting' and sneering. Everyone has heard of her but many are quick to dismiss her work even though few have read it. To understand this animosity we need to ask what it means to transgender lives if one presumes that Butler's limited understanding of, and allegorisation of, camp drag is a suitable example of the lived lives of transgender folk.

Butler (1999) begins her deployment of drag by reference to Esther Newton's study of camp, male drag acts. For Medhurst camp, and by extension male drag, is a 'defensive offensiveness' (Medhurst 1997, 276 cited in Richardson 2003.) 'because it is predicated upon an ironic, self-reflexive, hyperbolic performance of gender' (Richardson 2003, 430) in response to a homophobia often rooted in issues of perceived gender identity transgression rather than sexuality. Butler (1993, 122) however uses the term 'enabling violation' to underscore that drag may be a productive resistance rather than a reactive response to and following from homophobia. Despite a difference in terminology both Medhurst and Butler underscore drag as a hyperbolic performance that questions gender even whilst heterosexual gender and sexuality 'mundanely' accept and repeat the norms of that matrix.

Given that Butler is careful to argue that there are many genders and many ways of doing gender we should be careful not to attribute a hyperbolic gender performance of camp to all forms of drag and transgender lives. Halberstam (2005) differentiates between drag king performance and camp arguing that the former includes both a quiet understatement and earnest repetition of a fragile male masculinity absent and distinct

from the sarcasm of camp. For Thanem (2011) allegorising drag does not capture the actual complicated lived realities they experience as a transvestite and the range of experiences, styles and lives that help them maintain a transvestism but that may be carefully removed to appear traditionally male whilst at work (Thanem and Wallenberg 2015). Thanem and Wallenberg (2015) discuss this further to argue that transvestites 'underdo' rather than hyperbolically exaggerate a female gender and that by 'underdoing' gender transvestites present a much more complicated melange of gender styles and cues than a two-dimensional parody. Thanem's styling is most certainly not hyperbolic (Thanem and Wallenberg 2015) and whilst there is evidently an embodied need to *be* transgender this is tempered by a need to hold down a job and 'pass' in a heteronormative world.

Trans-folk are usually presumed to 'pass' in society where 'passing', as a means of stigma management, allows them to slip through a cisgender society unnoticed as their preferred rather than birth assigned gender (see Author 2016 for a discussion of passing). For Thanem (2011) 'passing' is not about crossing the gender matrix but of appearing to conform with the gender that one was assigned at birth whilst subtly maintaining that one *is* a transvestite male. 'Passing' is a means to avoid abuse and physical assault in a world where – as Butler has repeatedly noted – a failure to conform with the norms of society may result in abuse, physical assault and in the case of Venus Xtravaganza (Butler 1993, 124-140) her 'failure to pass completely' (1993, 130) resulted in her murder. Passing is thus opposed to a hyperbolic gender performance as the latter deliberately draws attention to the artist and their exaggerated gender performance. For Pullen and Rhodes (2013) *Futurama's* cartoon robot is forced to do drag but I argue this is not gender performativity but a representation of hyperbolic performance.

A hyperbolic performance may well ironically question gender but the femininity of binary transgender women is as natural and real as it may be to cisgender women; it is not an ironic questioning of gender but an expression of gender and how they feel. As Jay Prosser (1998) argues for Venus there was no 'drag performance' but a more mundane performative understanding of herself as, and desire to be, a 'real woman' and not a drag queen or gay male (Prosser 1998, 47-48). For Prosser (1998, 49) it is 'borderline perverse' that her transsexual status and the trans-panic that resulted in her murder is deflected and her transsexuality undercut by Butler in order to valorise male drag and why many transgender folk have an antipathy for Butler's early work.

Not all trans folk wish to 'pass' as a (cis)man or (cis)woman but prefer to be recognised as trans folk. Some may stay within the heterosexual matrix but identify as transgender women or transgender men and make manifest that sex/gender is not a binary comprised only of the cisgender. Some, like Thanem, may appear to conform to a binary gender identity whilst questioning and extending what is meant by male masculinity. Some are gender fluid and move between the 'fixed' poles of the (supposed) male-female binary, repeatedly undoing the presumption of sex as static and deterministic. Some, myself included, are 'outside' the matrix – I am non-binary and do not regard myself as either male or female. In all of these transgender lives binary gender is done, undone, underdone, redone and refused in many diverse ways and for differing reasons yet few, if any, can be described as camp drag.

Schilt and Connell (2007) emphasise studying the real, rather than allegorical, lives of transgender folk. This emphasis demonstrates that survival is the focus for many of us rather than a need to make a political statement through hyperbolic performance. Thanem (2011) is critical of Brewis et al (1997), and indirectly of Butler, for focusing on allegorical examples that over-simplify complicated and varied

transgender lives. Thanem's work is an important voice because of its authenticity but more voices need to be heard from to reflect the diversity of lives, identities and experiences of the 'transgender umbrella'. It thus seems overly simplistic particularly given her concern with universality for Butler to collapse this diversity in to a singular position of camp drag and conflate survival as a theoretical-politico act.

To be blunt, what does a gay male drag queen's hyperbolic femininity have to do with my life? I neither perform nor allegorise a binary gender - I identify as non-binary. I am not a gay male who wears a sequined dress on a Saturday night to entertain and slips back in to a 'man's' suit for work on Monday morning. Neither male nor female, I am just me 24/7; there is no deliberate performance, no dressing up. We may both have non-conforming gender identities but we are very different.

For a third year I volunteered at the 2016 Northern Pride festival where a drag queen act took to the stage. The act included abusing transgender folk; I turned my back to steadfastly ignore it whilst I moved through the audience asking people to fill in a questionnaire and donate money. Later, I took a brief rest in the volunteer's tent backstage. The queen, now without make-up, wig and partly dressed in 'man's' clothes, entered and saw me. Ignoring the other volunteers they walked up to me, looked me up and down, sneered and walk off.

Elsewhere and else when I find myself wandering through a UK northern city in the late evening. I pass by a pub and the three people smoking, apparently guarding the entrance. One shouts at my retreating back 'Only trannies tonight. Fuck off! You're a fucking girl.' Except I'm not. I ignore them and carry on walking and so accepted their interpellation of me as 'not tranny' and demand to fuck off.

Next morning I have a morning coffee in the hotel's café. The three are there checking out. They nudge each other and one says loudly, 'Look at that fucking queer in the skirt. He's disgusting.'

It seems I am too trans for some and not trans enough for others.

For Butler (1999, 189) performativity is a way in which we challenge or contest gender norms in order to subvert or displace them in a binary heterosexual matrix. Is this contestation the only form of performativity or are there performatives that ignore, or do not repeat and refuse, or misunderstand, or indeed happily accept those norms?

As I medically transition I find that I am abused by strangers less often as they increasingly read me as a woman and less often as a 'tranny'. I am neither a woman or a 'tranny' but non-binary and express my gender through contradictory gender cues – long hair shaved on one side of my head, paratrooper boots worn with a skirt, a body that has breasts and an untucked penis. The more people that read me as a binary woman or man the more I exaggerate the contradiction. My gender performativity requires I manage a contradiction by maintaining an equilibrium where a failure to do so comes at the cost of either erasing my gender identity or escalating public abuse. Unlike Butler (1999) this is not a simple contestation of norms but a need to balance a complicated and dynamic contradiction that co-constitutes my dysphoria discussed below and a need to survive.

Schilt and Connell (2007) argue that trans folk may 'craft' rather than hyperbolically perform gender in order to limit gender trouble at work. Crafting, much like passing, helps increase the possibility of surviving in an ostensibly binary heterosexual matrix that reads all bodies and performativities as binarised. Their discussion of crafting reveals how transgender folk may be reinterpreted in terms of that binary in such a way that the potential for disruption is minimised: the NHS, close

friends and family know I identify as non-binary but still regard me as a binary transgender woman.

In a critique of Butler, Leo Bersani (1987, 207) argues that the ability of gay males to parody macho heterosexuality is limited if heterosexuals do not recognise themselves as objects of parody. He extends this argument (Bersani 1995, 48-52) to suggest that parodic performance is limited to 'naughty imitations' (48) that lack the ability to subvert. Following Bersani do very similar performative acts carry the same force to 'displace' or contest a norm irrespective of the individual – are the marginalised and disenfranchised really as able to challenge a social norm as those accepted by society (Kukla 2014)? If I am regarded as both a 'tranny' and a 'fucking girl' by those more transgender than I, am I doubly denied by them as both cisgender and transgender? Does my non-binary performativity subvert the norms of a heterosexual gender matrix or merely parody their binary transgender? Leo Bersani (1995, 51) comments:

'[m]ore exactly, resignification cannot destroy; it merely presents to the dominant culture spectacles of politically impotent disrespect. Is this truly subversive, and, more fundamentally, what does subversive mean? . . . It is, in any case, extremely doubtful that resignification, or redeployment, or hyperbolic miming, will ever overthrow anything.'

My dysphoria blues

Returning briefly to my autoethnographic example about toys – I do not know the truth of gender perhaps because it is something that I experience, feel and which undoes me. Whilst some invest in and wish to amplify a body's capabilities or surface others, particularly those who seek some form of 'sex reassignment surgery', de-invest and fundamentally change and reject a mis-aligned gender and body in order to be

accepted as 'human'. What connects both cyborgs and us transgender 'freaks' is dysphoria (Rubin 1992).

I have 20,000 days on this planet during which I have been vilified verbally as, for example, a 'freak' or a 'fucking joke' and even as a 'fucking girl'. I have also been physically attacked because I do not conform to the gender norms of society. I've just brushed some hair from my face and as I did so I noticed a sharp metallic tang. I look at my fingers and there is blood. I pull up the left leg of my jeans and survey the bleeding from the self-inflicted scratches and cuts. Today, and not for the first time, I was accused of being HIV positive because I am transgender and sexually active. It seems I am a vector of disease, a source of social contagion to be (a)voided and expelled.

My dysphoria is not just an outward manifestation of my supplement; it is also a manifestation of how society both reacts to and regards me as its supplement to reject and void as unwanted. Would my dysphoria manifest if I was not abused both publically and privately so often?

My gender specialist seemed particularly happy to note instances of genital dysphoria but seemed indifferent when I talked of how my dysphoria more often localises at my shoulders, Adam's apple, knees, nose but particularly at my left shin and hands. She asked if genital dysphoria had ever resulted in suicidal ideation and I, knowing what is expected of me, lied and said, 'No'. I can only continue with medical transition if she considers me to be both gender dysphoric and mentally stable. I remained silent on the occasions when I tried to auto-castrate, made no mention of my self-harming: grinding broken glass in to the palm of one hand has left slivers there that I can sometimes feel move; the skin on my shin now pale white, lifeless and papery from years of cutting and slicing... I know I am allowed to be dysphoric but not too dysphoric

and the only dysphoria that matters is genital. It's yet another contradiction of my gender performativity.

I do not understand this dysphoria but I feel it as a truth of my gender because it manifests at times when I both lose equilibrium and can only seem to regain through self-harming. Dysphoria and self-harm reminds me that I have a permeable surface that feels pain and a body that may therefore matter a little.

Gayle Rubin (1992) argued that dysphoria, just like gender, might be represented as a continuum. The sexed body is positioned within and affected by multiple continuums - sex/gender, dysphoria, sexuality – rather than only sex/gender. In order to understand sexed bodies requires an understanding of how they are affected by dysphoria. As a continuum dysphoria manifests as a need for body alterations that range from fitness regimes through cosmetic surgery and an investment in perfecting the ‘body beautiful’, to tattooing, branding and alteration, to a need for reconstructive surgery. A dysphoria continuum allows both that not all transgender folk experience any significant dysphoria and that when experienced it may manifest in many different ways and locations and require different coping strategies and not just medical intervention culminating in full genital reconstruction. In Thanem and Knights (2012) Thanem discusses their dysphoric feelings having developed male breasts and a lack of visible facial and body hair as a youth whilst other boys of their age were flat chested and developed visible body and facial hair. Thanem’s dysphoria seems to be not one where the body was other than their internalised felt gender but perhaps wasn’t sufficiently ‘male’.

To return to Butler, our body surface is a screen that reflects alignment or collision between a projected internalised sense of self and the social norms that constrain what is permitted to be reflected on that screen and how others interpret that

projection. Collision may well lead us to change, adapt, extend and perhaps enhance our bodies through modification and transform the supposedly 'real', 'natural' impermeable human surface to become different to ourselves. But for me it is also part of a dynamic equilibrium that co-constitutes me as a non-binary transgender person. Dysphoria, as I experience it, is not a 'self-hatred' as suggested by some transphobic 'gender critical' commentators, but an affect of this collision that both does and undoes me. An affect that may be partially resolved but will not be negated by altering my genital morphology. And so we arrive at another contradiction - if I could undo binary gender there would be no collision or dysphoria and I would no longer be non-binary. Without both gender and dysphoria would I be an unfeeling, genderless robot?

If I was a robot I would have no psychic depth, no interior to make manifest affective gender on my material surface. A mere surface without depth on to which society could project its gender norms where no collision could occur. I would feel no dysphoria and would not be undone by gender: I would not be human and would feel no pain. Without collision what need for change?

Why Butler may be important for trans lives: A conclusion of sorts

In writing this essay I am very conscious of how few, if any, answers I have. All I have done is raise question after question that reveal little other than my inability to understand both the truth of gender and Butler in any real depth. As a transgender person I do find Judith Butler's work somewhat problematic partly as her reliance on allegorical examples means she often does not always capture the lived somatic experiences of trans folk (Prosser 1998). Perhaps more importantly I also wonder if her discussion of the skin surface places too much emphasis on it not just as a site of internal projection and a potential collision with social gender norms but because that very collision may help co-constitute my gender identity. So, her work is important for

trans folk because it may provide an understanding both of how that collision ‘does’ and ‘undoes’ us in a heteronormative world and may help explicate gender dysphoria without resorting to the transphobic claim that it is merely an internalised ‘self-loathing’. Furthermore, her argument that society will not avoid a circular totalisation by simply amplifying the range of binary gender practices demonstrates how transgender bodies and folk should be accepted more in society and without which there is no change. This is why I believe that we need to consider her work a little more carefully but in a way where we critically question how and why all transgender bodies matter, even my dysphoric non-binary one.

For Pullen and Rhodes (2013) and *Futurama*’s cross-dressing robot, unlike Venus Extravaganza there is no mis-alignment between internal identification and social demands for normativity. As a cartoon robot it is merely a screen on to which gender norms are projected, read but not undone. Robots have physical form but lack genitalia, a psychic depth and gender. Robots do not feel, are not affected by inhuman abuse and treatment, are not aware of their non-gender status and do not dream of electric sheep. A robot is not a permeable surface and does not change yet is regarded as alien and dangerous enough to threaten a human world. It is worse for transgender folk because we have feelings and psychic depth but despite which we are dehumanised and subjected to routine abuse and violence merely for being here and being different.

I publically perform my non-binary gender and refuse to be assimilated in to a transphobic society as a woman or a transgender woman who ‘passes’ and instead make my non-binary self-evident. Despite this I seem to be read again and again as female and this in turn results in my increasingly pushing back to refuse a binary identity and undo this organization. But as I push back I also increase the potential for a collision between gender norms and a mis-alignment between my internal identity as non-binary.

Gender performativity is a dynamic equilibrium where the more society tries to normalise and read me as binary the more I have to push back and make evident I am non-binary even whilst knowing that this leads to an increasing risk of punishment. But whilst I can transgress gender I cannot undo it without ceasing to be non-binary. Such are the contradictions of my gender performativity.

I am neither male nor female but increasingly it's 'miss', 'love', 'darling'. I used to be called a tranny but now I'm just not tranny enough. So I make my gender transgressions increasingly more evident and now have a transgender symbol tattooed on my forearm. Will that be evident enough or will it compliment the scars of my dysphoria which people pretend are not there. Do people only read a gender they want to see?

I, robot?

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ⁱ This is different to the original meaning of a Robot (capital 'R') where they were 'organic products... and came in two sexes' (Czarniawska and Gustavsson, 2008, 668. Czarniawska and Gustavsson refer here to Karel Capek's play R.U.R.). Although Czarniawska and Gustavsson discuss 'female' cyborgs and women in science fiction there are many stories and films of 'male' cyborgs. The trope of victorious cyborg versus evil robot has a long history and can be found for instance in the 2004 film *I, Robot*. (This film is rather different to Isaac Asimov's series of short stories collected together as 'I, Robot' that explore the issue of human technophobia towards robots.) One interesting contrast is the 3rd film in the *Terminator* series, 'Rise of the Machines', where the male hero, a cyborg, battles and eventually vanquishes a mercurial female gynoid that may share a heritage with Pandora's automata. The extent to which an android may 'pass' as human forms one of the narrative threads in Philip K Dick's (1968) *Do androids dream of electric sheep*, which was subsequently filmed as *Blade Runner*.

ⁱⁱ Butler's (1999) first textual use of *différance* appears on p.51 despite the Index citing it first for p. 14 and again for p.25.

ⁱⁱⁱ I place 'nearly' in parenthesis since it is nearly impossible to be issued with a revised gender certificate without surgery. To get such a revised certificate nearly always requires written proof of post-operative status from the relevant surgeon and even then a revised certificate is often refused.