Article

Panti Bliss still can't get hitched: Meditations on performativity, drag, and gay marriage

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Abstract

This article uses the activism of drag queen Panti Bliss during Ireland's marriage equality campaign to revisit two of the foundational debates of performativity theory: namely, the contentious political and ontological status of drag and the function of the exemplary performative "I do." It attempts to answer Judith Butler's provocative question: "what happens to the performative when its purpose is precisely to undo the presumptive force of the heterosexual ceremonial" (1993a: 16). Taking account of concerns about LGBTQ assimilation, it argues that the gay "I do" creates new categories of inclusion and abjection, and, ultimately, new categories of the queer. It suggests, further, that the ontological slippage inherent to drag – often more than "just" performance, yet not quite constitutive of a performative identity – can help to maintain and reignite the political power of the queer in the face of hegemonic co-option.

> . . . "I pronounce you" puts into effect the relation it names. But where and when does such a performative draw its force, and what happens to the performative when its purpose is precisely to undo the presumptive force of the heterosexual ceremonial? (Butler, 1993a: 16)

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The republic of love?

While the market-researched strategy for winning Ireland's 2015 marriage equality referendum was to appeal to Catholic, socially conservative middle Ireland through as straight a campaign as possible (Healy et al., 2016), it is something of a lovely oddity that Panti Bliss, a provocative drag queen, emerged as the most recognizable figurehead of the movement. Bliss (aka Rory O'Neill) has long been involved in the struggle for gay rights in Ireland (Walsh, 2015b: 21–45), where homosexuality was only decriminalized in 1993. In spite of these activist credentials, she kicked Ireland's gay marriage debate into gear quite by accident.

In a conversation about gay rights on an Irish chat show on 11 January 2014, O'Neill expressed the opinion that anyone who actively campaigns for gay people to be treated differently to straight people is homophobic. When pressed to do so by the host, O'Neill named a number of public figures and the Iona Institute, a right-wing religious organization, as purveyors of homophobia. These influential conservatives initiated legal actions against O'Neill and the national broadcaster, Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ), for defamation, whereon RTÉ apologized, distanced itself from O'Neill, and paid out approximately €85,000. As Fintan Walsh (2015a: 104) points out, this effectively meant that homophobia could not be called out in the run up to the referendum. Public outrage ensued, and Bliss was given a platform at Ireland's national theatre, The Abbey, to talk about homophobic oppression. The resultant 10-minute address (O'Neill, 2014a; Bliss, 2014) went viral online, garnering media attention around the world. Bliss undoubtedly won the public relations war, and, in the wake of the outpouring of support, she became a symbolic figurehead of the marriage equality campaign.

The campaign was successful. On 22 May 2015, 62.07% of the electorate said yes to the proposition that "Marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex," and the Republic of Ireland became the first country in the world to approve same-sex marriage by popular referendum. On 23 May, as the votes were counted and the yes campaign's victory was assured, rainbow-clad celebrants, government representatives, and national and international media gathered at Dublin Castle. There, RTÉ presenter Miriam O'Callaghan shot an iconic interview with Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Féin, Frances Fitzgerald, Minister of Justice and Equality, and Bliss. When Adams posted a selfie of the three interviewees to his twitter account, it seemed emblematic of a changing Ireland. The presence of Adams, linked in the public imagination, if not in official record, to the violently sectarian IRA, suggested a Republicanism ready to look to the future; Fitzgerald represented a country beginning to normalize women in positions of leadership; and Bliss – a wide smile on her painted lips – signalled that religiously-inscribed gender and sexual repression could and would no longer characterize an independent Irish nation. *The New York Times* described it as "a scene that was unthinkable a generation ago" (Stack, 2015: D5).

However, as the ebullient mood began to settle, many thinkers voiced concerns about corporate and state instrumentalization of the gay rights movement and the

dangers of painting/taking such a convenient picture/selfie of a tolerant, liberal, and caring society. They critiqued the co-option of gay rights by an anti-immigrant, misogynistic, anti-working class, neoliberal political regime, and asked "marriage equality for whom?" Anne Mulhall – who has previously argued that the heteroized and homonormalized subjects produced by the regulatory function of civil partnerships and marriage serve to mask Ireland's other ethnic, gendered, and racial exclusions (Mulhall, 2013: 291–293) – wrote a post-referendum blog equating gay marriage with a conservative drive towards respectability and with neoliberal pink-washing, noting the commercial and political opportunism of state agencies and elected officials in the wake of the result (Mulhall, 2015). Performance scholar and queer theorist Fintan Walsh expresses concerns that neoliberal violations are embedded in the apparent benefits of gay marriage; he notes that those without access to wealth are not privileged by this kind of legitimation (Walsh, 2015b: 8–9). In a harshly worded and controversial blog post, writer James Cussen (2016) rejects the idea of "radical reform" as a "contradiction in terms" and regrets his previous enthusiasm for and involvement with the cause, believing, in hindsight, that gay marriage "was, and will continue to be used to set the limits of acceptable and unacceptable minority expression and civic participation in a dangerous way." Aoife Neary stresses the lived nature of LGBTQ politics and the pragmatism that defined the marriage equality campaign, a pragmatism that meant, in the polarized environment of pre-referendum debates, many LGBTQ people sceptical of marriage could not really voice their concerns. Similarly to Mulhall she demonstrates how, in the Irish context, "a politics of change based on normalisation and sameness simultaneously (re)produces an 'acceptable' sexual citizen and reassigns 'others' as peripheral" (Neary, 2016: 757). She regrets that these pragmatic politics have played a part in "foreclosing any radical sexual politics and broader discussions about kinship and sexual citizenship" (Neary, 2016: 765).

These are vital critiques, and I do not seek to negate concerns that gay marriage has the potential to domesticate queer politics in a manner that consolidates state power, pink-washes exclusion, and creates new categories of the abject. As Neary's study acknowledges, many campaigners for gay marriage also recognize these dangers. Interestingly, Bliss is amongst them, and, ironically, she does not consider herself the marrying kind (quoted in Stack, 2015: D5). Judith Butler draws a productive distinction between political support and critical acceptance of gay marriage (Butler, 2002), and many activists, like Bliss, occupy a politically supportive but critically sceptical position. This, in combination with impassioned critique in both academic and public discourse, can in itself partially assuage the fear that gay marriage spells the end of queer activism. Through recourse to debates in early performativity theory, this article situates Bliss – a drag queen campaigning for rights from which she, perceived as mere performance, is excluded – as emblematic of the ability of the queer to camouflage and reconstitute itself in relation to the altered hegemony that proceeds from gay marriage. It is performatively significant, I will argue, that Panti Bliss still can't get hitched.

A successful gay marriage campaign with a drag queen front and centre is something of a match made in sequined heaven for performance studies scholars, combining two of the foundational debates of (gender) performativity theory, namely: the iteration of the exemplary performative statement "I do" and the contentious political and ontological status of drag. Drag and marriage represent core concerns in performativity theory because they both deal with the regulatory governance of the heterosexual matrix, the production of gender and sexuality, and the tension between individual volition (or voluntarism) and socially produced categories of identity (or determinism). In studying the performativity of gay marriage and, in the case of Bliss and the Marriage Equality referendum, the performance and performativity of a drag queen demanding marriage rights, I argue that the intersection of the regulatory performativity of the marriage ceremony with the ambivalent ontology of drag opens up an imaginative space that undermines marriage as a heteronormative institution, even while it enables the queer subject to locate herself outside of the newly defined contract. In accounting for (in accordance with Judith Butler's provocation, which frames this article) the effects of a gay "I do" on the "presumptive force" of the heterosexual ceremonial, I contradict Cussen's pithy observation that a radical reform is a contradiction in terms. If radical, in its etymological sense, connotes not only systemic change but also an examination of the roots of the system, then it implies the kinds of changes that affect the central and regulatory performative institutions of a society. Lee Edelman points to the paradox that "Conservatism profoundly imagines the radical rupturing of the social fabric, while liberalism conservatively clings to a faith in its limitless elasticity" (Edelman, 1998: 22). This liberally inflected paper seeks to imagine ruptures, to imagine the kinds of changes that rip the regulatory mechanisms of the heterosexual matrix so that something new is created, not by rapid ejaculation, but by slow incubation and painful generational separation, where the chords linking categories and communities of exclusion are cut, and new bodies of queerness emerge. It argues that some queer performative "I dos" can affect this kind of rupture, articulating new modes of struggle, and that drag, occupying an ontological position both inside and outside the real, embodies and provides a catalyst for such articulations.

Gay marriage: Subvers-ish

Performatives create what they name, and thinking through performativity offers the scope to consider what ruptures, what new categories of exclusion, might be named by a gay "I do." However, wider movements and literatures have also addressed the assimilationist and/or subversive qualities of gay marriage. In the introduction to their edited collection, *The Marrying Kind*, Mary Bernstein and Verta Taylor (2013a: 1) assert that, "rarely has a social movement goal so central to a movement's political agenda been so fraught". Comprehensive literature reviews with regard to this problem can be found in Bernstein and Taylor's (2013a) introduction, as well as in Katrina Kimport's (2013) monograph, *Queering*

Marriage. Each resource offers a valuable taxonomy of strands of discourse and ideological camps. While it is, of course, an over-simplification to divide these discourses and camps into ''pros'' and ''antis,'' there are certainly some theorists who – for heterogeneous reasons – view the marriage equality movement in broadly positive terms, and those who do not.

Theorists such as Cheshire Calhoun (2000), Evan Wolfson (2004), and Jyl Josephson (2005) understand gay marriage to grant LGBT couples legal protections and an end to prejudice. Conservatively, Andrew Sullivan (1996) and Jonathan Rauch (2004) stress the benefits for LGBTQ people and heterosexuals of integration or normalization. Alternatively, William Eskridge (2002) argues that gay marriage subverts gender roles and heteronormativity. From a feminist perspective, Martha Ertman (1998) argues for the worth for both women and LGBTQ people of focusing marriage on economic rather than gendered or sexed categories, while essayist Rebecca Solnit (2014) celebrates the ways in which gay marriage undermines the hierarchical tradition underlying heterosexual marriages. (Indeed, as AE Goldberg (2013: 87–92) shows, in gay partnerships traditionally gendered work is shared far more equally than in straight ones). Adam Isaiah Green (2013) demonstrates that gay couples do challenge hegemonic gendered and sexual structures, particularly monogamy and the gendered division of labour. Amy L Stone (2013) and Katie Oliviero (2013) point out that the strong homophobic reaction that gay marriage continues to illicit from conservative factions is indication of its threat to the status quo.

Critiques of gay marriage from within LGBTQ scholarship are similarly ideologically varied. A sizeable cohort of scholars and thinkers stress the need to avoid privileging gay marriage over other forms of love and kinship, as well as the potentially stigmatizing effect of gay marriage on the kinds of relationships that continue to operate outside of state sanction (BSSM Collective, 2008; Butler, 2002; Duggan, 2002, 2008, 2012; Gay Shame San Francisco, n.d.; Valverde, 2006; Walters, 2001; Warner, 1999; Wittman, 1970). Some characterize marriage as a fundamentally patriarchal institution (Barker, 2012; Echols, 1989; Stein, 1997; Taylor and Whittier, 1992). Some are convinced that what Lisa Duggan (2002) calls ''homonormativity'' will spell the end of LGBTQ community and culture, as well as the anti-hegemonic political drive that stems from it (Duggan and Kim, 2005; Ettelbrick, 1992; Warner, 1999). Analyses of gay marriage as a neoliberal economic tool suggest that it may remove social and economic responsibility from the state and place it on the spousal pair (Duggan and Kim, 2005; Young and Boyd, 2006),[1] while Arlene Stein (2013) finds that gay marriage can economically privilege those who already have the most (although Kathleen Hull and Timothy Ortyl (2013) find that it would be a mistake to assume this is always the case).

There is also a considerable body of literature suggesting that the advent of marriage equality and greater rights for gay people more generally has led to a post-gay or beyond the closet moment, in which emphasizing sameness to the majority heterosexual population takes precedence over defending queer difference, and sexuality is no longer a central organizing principle of community or politics

(Ghaziani, 2011; Seidman, 2003; Stein, 1997; Vaid, 1995; Ward, 2008). For Bernstein and Taylor (2013a: 29), the essays in their volume suggest that "the consequences of same-sex marriage and the marriage equality movement are far more complex and challenging than queer critics fear". Similarly, Kimport (2013: 12) argues that her empirical data "demonstrates that the impacts of same-sex marriage on heteronormativity are far more complex than anyone anticipated". She finds that LGBTQ couples contest heteronormativity and also shore it up, and focuses on "how the practice of same-sex marriage can illustrate the stubbornness and tenacious appeal of heteronormativity in contemporary society" (Kimport, 2013: 12). I understand, like Bernstein and Taylor and Kimport, that the effects of gay marriage are multifaceted and even contradictory: gay marriage both homonormalizes queer subjects and subverts heteronormative structures. This article brings insights from early performativity theory to bear on the debate, arguing that when a newly inclusive/assimilationist performative "I do" abjects new categories of relationships and people, the queer does not disappear. Rather, it ruptures and transforms.

Naming and shaming: (Gay) marriage and performativity theory

Returning to the significance of the marriage ceremonial in early performativity theory at a time of such momentum for gay marriage in the West seems a crucial gesture as we seek to celebrate the gains and mourn the losses of the marriage equality movement, as well as strive to re-articulate the aims of queer theory and politics at the advent of a different kind of sexual and gender hegemony. Famously, JL Austin (1975) shows that performative language does not only represent reality but also creates it. "I do" is his primary example of a performative utterance in the first of his now canonical 1955 lectures *How to Do Things With Words*, and it resurfaces throughout the lectures as an unambiguous example of a speech act. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993: 3) wittily observes:

> The marriage ceremony is, indeed, so central to the origins of "performativity" (given the strange, disavowed but unattenuated persistence of the exemplary in [Austin's] work) that a more accurate name for How to Do Things With Words might have been How to Say (or Write) "I do" about twenty million times without ending up more married than you started out. (Short title: I Do – Not!)

By postmodern standards, Austin is conservative about the contexts in which a successful or "felicitous" speech act can happen, requiring six criteria to be met: an accepted conventional procedure; appropriate people and circumstances; correct execution; complete execution; presence of the thoughts, feelings, and intentions required by the procedure; and, finally, subsequent conduct that remains in line with the participants' intentions (Austin, 1975: 15–16). A speech act will be "*in a peculiar way* hollow or void" (Austin, 1975: 22, emphasis in original) if it is

Figure 1. Gerry Adams, Panti Bliss and Frances Fitzgerald at Dublin Castle. Courtesy of Gerry Adams.

performed by actors on a stage, signalling a strict line between theatrical performance and the performative. I would suggest that this understanding of when and how speech becomes action informs contemporary doxic conceptions of when performatives happen far more than the postmodern and deconstructionist theories that proceed from it.

Derrida takes issue with the centrality of the intending "I" in any theory of speech that creates what it names, and deconstructs Austin's attempt to privilege the act of locution over the context in which it takes place. For Derrida (1988: 15), failure or "infelicity" is a "necessary possibility" for any speech act to have taken place. Looking at Austin's fifth and sixth criteria, this seems fair: thoughts, feelings, intentions, and future conduct are certainly less than stable categories when it comes to declaring speech performative. Derrida asks if it is not true that "what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, 'non-serious' citation (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather a general iterability – without which there would not even be a successful performative?" (Derrida, 1988: 17). By this logic, every "I do" is contemporaneously felicitous and infelicitous: the vow taking place on stage still informs an overall system of iterations from which the speech act draws its force. This mode of thinking about the marriage ceremonial opens up nuances in the relationship between performance and the performative. If, under doxic conceptions of the relationship

between representation and the real, Bliss campaigns for the right to a performative utterance for which she, as performance, is ineligible, then conversely, following Derrida, Bliss's hypothetical "I do" is *in a peculiar way* valid. Her request as a drag queen for access to the marriage ceremony possesses a politically and ontologically productive ambivalence.

We learn from Butler that the performative "I do" is also a shaming taboo instrumental in naming and creating the performative "queer." Like Derrida, Butler's conceptualization of performativity decentres the "I," which she understands as "the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak" (Butler, 1993a: 18). It is not from the "I" that the speech act derives its power, because there is no I that "stands behind discourse"(Butler, 1993a: 18). For Butler (1993a), "queer" is equally a performative – an identity created through being named, a citation, the power of which comes from revisable history, and outside of which the queer subject cannot exist. She questions the relationship between the illocutory queer performative and Austin's foundational heterosexual exemplary, saying:

> To what extent, then, has the performative "queer" operated alongside, as a deformation of, the "I pronounce you . . ." of the marriage ceremony? If the performative operates as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which "queers" those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without social sanction. (Butler, 1993a: 18)

As the scholarship on gay marriage reviewed above suggests, this shaming function is not necessarily negated when the "I pronounce you" marries a same-sex couple (a point perhaps made particularly clearly by Daniel Enstedt's (2015) article on the invention of "genuine homosexuality" by the Church of Sweden to differentiate good marriageable queers from bad promiscuous ones).

Sedgwick, further theorizing shame and the queer performative, revokes the "first person singular present indicative active" (Sedgwick, 1993: 3) that defines Austin's formula and suggests "shame on you" (Sedgwick, 1993: 4) as an alternative. "Shame on you" positions queer identity as the subject of a historical and social context; it locates the political potency of the queer in relation to the childhood scene of shame, from which it draws "a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" (Sedgwick, 1993: 4). For Sedgwick, shame creates the queer and its political force. Echoing concerns regarding homonormativity and the destruction of queer political community and politics, we can build on Sedgwick to warn that if the new and inclusive marriage ceremonial revokes the performative "shame on you" for certain categories of queer people, it also alienates them from their generative power.

Continuing the philosophical project of locating performativity as always the product of a revisable history, Sedgwick and Andrew Parker write that it is "the constitution of a community of witness that makes the marriage" (Parker and

Sedgwick, 1995: 10). Like a rapt theatre audience, we collectively suspend our disbelief. Marriage is "a kind of fourth wall or invisible proscenium arch that moves through the world" (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995: 11). It provides a frame for gender and sexuality, rendering these messy categories less threatening, and reifying the sanctioned forms of kinship that we admit to reality.

Under felicitous conditions (cake! hats!), "I do" creates what it names, but the volition of the "I" is in tension, as Derrida explains, with a "general iterability" subject to revision and shifts, which can validate and invalidate the performative. Even under felicitous conditions, the "I do" might also create what it does not name, queering those who, in Butler's terms, resist or oppose marriage, or occupy it without social sanction. So now that many LGBTQ folk are eligible to appear under that invisible proscenium, who is not? Performatively, who and what is the newly inclusive and/or assimilationist "I do" naming and shaming? And if it is those who resist and oppose as well as those who do not (yet) qualify for social sanction, then is the new queer a little more voluntarist, a little less deterministic than queer theory has tended to understand? In the coming sections, when I have explored the similarly inflected debates that exist in performativity theory with regard to drag, I will argue for the possibility drag affords, specifically in relation to the performative "I do," to revise and shift the iterability that heterosexualizes and queers subjects, and at once remains outside of homonormalizing effects.

Dragged in two directions

O'Neill began performing in drag during his tenure at art college in the 1980s. In his autobiography, *Woman in the Making*, he recounts a story of modelling hand-bags for a students' graduation show at the National College of Art and Design. Afterwards, he was asked to present flowers to one of the tutors, an act of appreciation that was not received as intended:

> I teetered over to her, tapped her on the shoulder and beamed at her. "These are for you."

> In front of all the proud parents, younger brothers and sisters of the students, she turned, looked at me proffering the flowers and screamed "FUCK OFF! I'M A FULL BLOWN WOMAN AND I'VE NEVER BEEN SO INSULTED IN MY LIFE!" (O'Neill, 2014b: 180)

As Bliss is certainly aware, drag – like gay marriage – can be controversial. Gay identity is subjugated under heteronormativity, female identity under patriarchy. In the parodic representation of womanhood by gay men, and even more so in the parodic representation of black womanhood by white gay men, the potential for misogyny/misogynoir and the potential for subversion of binary hierarchies of gender and race exist contemporaneously. Thus drag – central to the gay liberation movement since the 1970s, with drag queens famously on the front lines at

Stonewall (Arriola, 1995; Duberman, 1993; Zervigon, 2009) – has long been subjected to feminist critiques (usually, but not always, more nuanced that FUCK OFF! I'VE NEVER BEEN SO INSULTED IN MY ENTIRE LIFE). Radical second wave thinkers such as Marilyn Frye (1993), Judith Williamson (1986), Erika Munk (1985), Janice Raymond (1979), and Alison Lurie (1983) can regard drag as, to use Frye's (1983: 137) words, "a casual and cynical mockery of women" by "those who believe in their immunity to contamination". In an essay for the *Village Voice*, Munk famously compares drag to blackface. Contrarily, queer and cultural theorists such as Jack Babuscio (2002), Richard Dyer (2002), Jeffrey Escoffier (1985), and Andrew Ross (1989) insist on drag as an ironic exaggeration and critique of gender. Exploring this polarity, Verta Taylor and Leila J Rupp (Rupp and Taylor, 2003; Taylor and Rupp, 2004, 2005, 2006) ethnographically analyze the content, intentions, and collective identities of Key West drag queens. They position themselves against the structuralist or deterministic bias of queer theory (Taylor and Rupp, 2004: 116) and argue that drag queens are subversive of the gender system insofar as they form collective and individual identities that challenge the gender binary, which, in turn, plays a role in transforming binary gender and sexual systems. In contrast, in a study of four different renditions of drag performance, Stephen Schacht finds that drag is "frequently more reflective than transgressive of dominant cultures" (Schacht, 2005: 163), and argues that drag queens are "anything but gender anarchists," charging them with cashing in on a "patriarchal dividend" through misogyny and homophobia (Schacht, 2005: 174). José Muñoz distinguishes between mainstream or commercial drag, which "presents a sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption, representing a certain brand of integrationist liberal pluralism" (Muñoz, 1997: 85) (a critique – you will note – that sounds remarkably similar to some arguments against gay marriage) and terrorist drag, which resists co-option because of its intersectional nature, because of what Muñoz terms its "disidentifications" with both culture and counter-culture and, in particular, its ability to skewer the integrationist and reactionary elements of the latter. Marlon M Bailey (2013) notes a confluence and fluidity of identities in the ballroom culture of Detroit that seems to support Taylor and Rupp's observations in Key West, while analyzing, following Muñoz, the disidentification that arises from the intersections of black and queer culture at the balls. Considering these conflicting and perhaps contradictory studies of drag (one wonders if Munõz might not regard the Key West queens as symptomatic of an integrationist liberal pluralism, if Schacht might see, alongside intersectional disidentification, misogyny in the Detroit drag balls), it is easy to agree with Carol-Anne Tyler (1991) that it is best to read each instance symptomatically rather than declaring drag radical or conservative. As she astutely observes, "impersonators and their interpreters say more than they intend because unconscious as well as conscious impulses motivate their performance" (Tyler, 1991: 33).

Furthermore, in a Derridean vein, the system of gendered iterations that drag may be hegemonically mocking or subversively parodying is itself revisable. This is

observable in the fact that contemporary critiques of drag are perhaps more likely to come from trans advocates and intersectional feminists than from radical feminists, as per the controversy over the 2015 Free Pride Glasgow event, which attempted to ban drag on the ground that it might make trans people uncomfortable (Gander, 2015) or the 2015 motion passed by UK National Union of Students calling for a "zero tolerance" approach to drag, which it understood as "transphobic fancy dress" (Duffy, 2015). The terrain has shifted, but drag remains contentious. Like marriage, gendered costume is a key regulating institution of the heterosexual matrix, creating the categories it names and simultaneously shaming those who resist those categories. Perhaps it is exactly the power inherent in such regulatory agents of performative gender and sexuality that so potently reveals the dangers of co-option alongside the potential of subversion.

In this regard, it is telling that drag becomes of issue in Butler's early work as she refines her theory of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler agrees with Esther Newton that drag reveals one of the "key mechanisms" of gender construction (Butler, 1990: 174). She suggests, further, that "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (Butler, 1990: 174). Butler positions herself against earlier radical feminist critiques (Butler, 1990: 175–176). She acknowledges that the gender meanings parodied through drag "are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynistic culture" (Butler, 1990: 176), but understands them to be "denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization" (Butler, 1990: 176). For Butler, parody is not, in itself, subversive; she encourages reflection, therefore, on "what kind of performance will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality"(Butler, 1990: 177). This credits drag with anti-hegemonic political force in certain, unspecified contexts – contexts that need further analysis to delineate.

In *Bodies That Matter* (1993b), Butler takes issue with how the theory of drag articulated in *Gender Trouble* was received. Readers, she explains, understood her to advocate for drag as an exemplary mode of performatively inverting hegemonic gender norms. This voluntarist misreading of performativity reinserts the intending I into a theory of identity construction that – as I explained in the section above – actively and vocally disavows its primacy. In response, Butler underscores that "there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion" (Butler, 1993b: 125). Drag is subversive insofar as it reflects on gender constructionism and "disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler, 1993b: 125). Yet heterosexuality can co-opt drag. Heterosexuality can "concede its lack of originality and naturalness but still hold onto its power" (Butler, 1993b: 125) – Butler cites the films *Tootsie* and *Some Like It Hot* as examples. More, for Butler, drag is ambivalent – it can even be appropriative and subversive simultaneously (Butler, 1993b: 128). She also addresses the question of drag and subversion in "Critically queer," cautioning that, while there's nothing to stop a performance operating performatively, it is a mistake to reduce performativity to performance

(Butler, 1993a: 24). Ultimately, in "Critically Queer" Butler is sceptical of attempts to define the queer or the subversive, telling us, "subversiveness is the kind of effect that resists calculation" (Butler, 1993a: 29). There is a clear shift away from the political project of analyzing the conditions of drag performances that have the power to subvert the heterosexual matrix advocated in *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990).

   Perspectives on this shift are mixed.[2] For my part, like Taylor and Rupp, I recognize the links between cultural production and the construction of performative identities, and thus find this dismissal of the strategic potential of drag disappointing. Given Schacht's findings of misogyny, for example, or the propensity both Butler and Muñoz recognize for drag to be co-opted by heteronormativity, it seems productive to consider, as academics, the conditions under which drag becomes radical (whether through volition, what Tyler deems "unconscious impulses," or what Butler might term "historically revisable possibility"). Ambivalence and co-option complicate but do not negate the political force of drag. I do not agree with Sedgwick (1993: 15) that "kinda subversive; kinda hegemonic" is all that we can usefully say. In this quarrelsome vein, I return to Butler's philosophical task in *Gender Trouble*, reaffirm the importance of thinking through what kind of drag performance compels "a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality" (Butler, 1990: 177), and argue that such radical rethinking can be engendered by drag performance like Bliss's that exploits its ontological ambivalence to demand the impossible right for a drag queen to be married.

Performance and the performative: Invisible prosceniums

During the marriage equality campaign, a gay man signing himself John wrote a letter to O'Neill, subsequently published on Bliss's Facebook page, asking the performer to "please ditch the Panti image until after the referendum," and advising O'Neill that he is "incredibly naïve" if he thinks that Bliss's drag image would not be used "by the opponents of gay marriage to advance the argument that gay people are not suitable to be parents and that their relationships are not to be taken seriously" (John, 2014). Intuitively, it is fair to suggest that an outrageous drag queen risks alienating Irish voters with traditional values. Certainly, market research into how to win the campaign indicated that recognizably queer subjects and families should be absent from messaging (Healy et al., 2016: 43–45). Given this, Bliss was an unlikely spokesperson for marriage equality. However, as I argue elsewhere (O'Toole, forthcoming), it might be precisely Bliss's ontology as a drag queen that gives her power in a homophobic society. Butler, in her seminal essay on the performative constitution of gender, notes that a transvestite on a stage can compel significantly different reactions to the same transvestite on a bus – the former evoking delight and the latter negativity that might include anger and even violence (Butler, 1988: 527). A theatrical frame derealizes difference and renders it less threatening to the ideology of gender essentialism and to the

heterosexual matrix. In a TED Talk, Bliss reveals that she, presumably even when costumed as O'Neill, has never walked down the street holding a partner's hand without feeling uncomfortable. The social opprobrium evoked by such everyday performative acts is testament to the threat they pose to heteronormativity. Bliss as drag queen carries a theatrical frame around with her; semiotically coded as "just an act," she hides in plain sight, encouraging engagement and acceptance precisely because she is not "real." In the documentary *Queen of Ireland* (2015), O'Neill opines that straight people find it difficult to believe that a man in a dress might be telling them something serious. Paradoxically, Bliss is granted an audience and thus the opportunity to intervene in the marriage equality debate because she is not taken seriously.

With drag there is a slippage between performance and the performative. Unlike performative gender, drag might be considered a voluntarist act; however, it is intrinsically associated with the gay community, with people who are already – at least in terms of sexuality – gender non-conformists: clearly there is a relationship here between theatrical performance and performative identity. Bliss distances herself from the explicitly fictional drag of Dame Edna Everage, declaring in conversation at Concordia University (2016) that she is the same person as Rory. While plenty of cisgender people are drag artists, there is no reason that performance cannot act performatively. Drag provides a queer space that can and often does provide an avenue for those exploring trans and non-binary identities (Baker and Kelly, 2016; Shapiro, 2007; Taylor and Rupp, 2004). In short, the perceived ontological distinction between drag as gender performance and performative acts as gender identity is slippery. This, I would argue, is part of the subversive potential of drag – it provides a position at once unthreatening and outside the "real" from which to materialize the kind of gender and sexual difference that cannot be neatly subsumed by essentialist ideology. When Bliss asks for the right to be married, she is not really asking to be married, as she is not the kind of legal entity or identity recognized by the newly expanded contract. Bliss can ask for, and, *in a peculiar way* receive, the right to utter a witnessed performative "I do," yet that "I do" is *in a peculiar way* invalid, allowing her to cleave to the performative queer that Butler hears named by an "I pronounce you," to the political energy generated by Sedgwick's performative "shame on you." As performance, drag only pretends to revise and shift the iterations that heterosexualize and queer subjects, yet when it intervenes in gay marriage it works to performatively carry out these revisions and shifts, even while creating a fictionalized space outside of homonormaliszing effects.

This contention might seem over-reliant on the assumption that gay marriage does indeed revise and shift the iterabilities that make an "I do" performative. In the Irish context, the indirect effects of the marriage equality referendum signal shifts in performative identities and the regulation of gender and sexuality. Within two months of the marriage equality referendum, Irish trans people were granted the right to have their self-reported identities legally recognized without need for psychological assessment – progressive legislation even by global standards.

Marriage as a heterosexual institution had been a barrier to this, as it opened up legal questions regarding the status of trans people's extant marriages. As Mark Kelly of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties explained, the landslide vote for marriage equality "paved the way for critical improvements in the transgender equality law" and, significantly, "removed any constitutional impediment for married trans people to remain married to a person of the same gender" (ICCL, 2015). Ireland is now not only a country where gay people can be married, but also a country where transgender identities are no longer pathologized by the state, and in which the legal structures surrounding assigned gender have changed profoundly.

Marriage equality, then, contributed to queering significant aspects of Irish life and indirectly achieved expanded rights for LGBTQ people beyond the power to say "I do." It also, as performativity theory implies, is in the process of changing the designation of the queer, and thus necessitates consideration of who – in the future – will be named by the performative queer which operates as a shaming taboo alongside the (no longer exclusively) heterosexual marriage ceremonial. Butler, in conversation with Sara Ahmed, expresses surprise that queer theory has been used to affirm queer identity, but also realizes that it is questionable to "be startled by the directions that a term like 'queer' takes" (Butler, quoted in Ahmed, 2016: 489). So, with a commitment to remain less than startled should it turn out otherwise, I contend that queer performative identities might cease to imply anti-heterosexist love and sexual attraction, as they currently do in common if not always academic parlance, and come to delineate proliferating and diverse modes of organizing love, gender, sex, kinship, and reproduction, potentially including, but by no means limited to, polyamorous relationships; single parenting; people engaged in communal and platonic parenting structures; the consciously single; asexual people; promiscuous people; sex workers; perhaps even, as the bonds and definitions of kinship and reproduction change, incestuous relationships; people, like Bliss, with identities that exist in the perceived realm of representation; and – although this suggestion is open to the critique that it attributes undue voluntarism to queer performativity – those who choose to operate outside of hegemonic recognition. This generational separation will be painful, as communities of difference disintegrate and others emerge. If, for Butler, newly abjected sexual agents "constitute sexual possibilities that will *never* be eligible for a translation into legitimacy" (Butler, 2002: 18, emphasis mine), I can see no historical basis for such an absolute, and believe, contrarily, that the ability gay marriage exemplifies of the abject and impossible to become the accepted and real, of the capacity of our social, sexual, and gendered mores to change, must create psychological and cultural awareness of past exclusions that undermines the assumption of an immutable or natural kinship contract.

This awareness, combined with the transformative power that resides at the site of performative shame, maintains the queer as a locus of change and struggle, even as its relationship with heteronormativity changes. If the argument then becomes that as new queer agents demand and receive recognition, they too create new modes of abjection and the pattern repeats, then at what point must what

Edelman formulates as a (strangely conservative) liberal faith in the endless elasticity of the system simply snap? If we have a state that recognizes heterogeneous modes of kinship and rationally considers the necessity and effects of each newly articulated demand for recognition, or if we have a state that acknowledges the impossibility of recognizing all forms of kinship and allows partners and families to negotiate their status and kinship agreements on an individual basis, then have we not succeeded in even the most radically queer goal of destroying marriage? Of course, anarchists or libertarians might prefer the privatization of marriage, while socialists might worry that public sanction removes responsibility from the state and places it on the spousal pair/triple/quadruple/∞, but what I am proposing here is an expansion of the meaning of marriage until the invisible proscenium becomes visible as a frame for a cultural fiction. I radically envisage a performative "I do" that legally marries a person whom most would not currently consider a real person. When that happens – when Bliss is no longer queer – we will have lost the ability to distinguish between the "I do" as a performance and the "I do" as a performative. Edelman (1998) and Ghaziani (2011) note the propensity of the queer community to stress sameness above difference, to rush to assure heteronormativity that – should LGBTQ people be allowed to marry – society will remain the same. Perhaps otherwise healthily cynical queer thinkers have bought into these assurances a little too fully, failing to see the subterfuge, failing to give due weight to the radically conservative fear of the regulatory system of gender and sexuality finally tearing, its foundational fictions unable to hold.

Conclusion

If drag has an increased propensity for subversion in relation to the political target of marriage, then Panti Bliss asking for her impossible right to be married can compel a radical rethinking of the gendered and sexed logic of the heterosexual matrix. Or, at least it can if we are willing to use our imaginations. Imagine Bliss preening in a bridal chalet, her wig scraping the ceiling as she towers above the champagne flutes. Imagine her tipsy as she totters down a petal-strewn aisle, given away by her father, to marry [insert gent here]. Austin would be satisfied – the conventional procedure is followed; the celebrant and witnesses mark the correct personages and circumstances; everything goes off without a blunder; completely flawlessly; Bliss is in love and intends to stay in love as, of course, is [insert gent here]; and we all know that a girl's word is her bond. For the purposes of this thought experiment, Bliss is a legally recognized person, even while O'Neill continues to be legally recognized, because in the performative space created by this imagined rupture anyone can register, on a self-determined basis, as many legal identities as they like. Impossible? Ten years ago in Ireland, so was the idea that a person born biologically male could legally change her gender identity based on self-reported experience.

Let us imagine that Bliss has decided that when she marries [insert gent here], O'Neill and [insert gent here] will also be married. [Insert gent here], on the other

hand, has a legally recognized virtual alter ego, who will be married to neither O'Neill nor Bliss. Bliss had the option to marry [insert gent here] but leave O'Neill single, but that was not how she conceived of her performative identity (she says after all, that she and Rory are the same person), nor of the performative contract. Convoluted? Is all this voluntarism bureaucratically impossible, actually destructive of kinship contracts, perhaps morally wrong? So was the idea that a future version of oneself could renege on a marriage vow and marry another person up until 1995, when divorce was finally legalized in Ireland. Until 2015, so was gay marriage.

What would it mean for Panti Bliss to get hitched? To sell the radically expanded rights and recognitions required to make the fantastic situation above tenable, we would have to convince the middle ground that nothing was under threat. Maybe, as inch by inch these rights were achieved, it would seem as though nothing significant was changing. Drag provides a state of ontology with the potential to manifest new individual and social identities, even while it comfortingly asserts its own unreality – it's just a joke! Lighten up! We don't want to destroy marriage. Whatever gave you that impression? Nothing radical going on here! These performative shifts in the regulating mechanisms of gender and sexuality are not going to change a thing!

When Bliss asks for the right to be married – even if she is not the marrying kind – those liberal enough to do so might imagine O'Neill and [insert gent here] riding off into the sunset (which is, idiomatically speaking, funnier if you are Irish). Liberals conservatively imagine endless elasticity, not an ''I do'' that undoes the force of the heterosexual ceremonial, rendering it as voluntarist as performance, without removing the state supports and witnessing that provide protection for the vulnerable. (Kinship, after all, does not always mean kindness.)

Theorists discussed above offer differing evidence as to the problem of whether a gay ''I do'' undoes heteronormativity. I have argued that gay marriage assimilates the queer, subverts the heterosexual matrix, and creates new sites of abjection and queerness. Bliss is both assimilated and abjected. She is taken seriously because she is not serious. She is performance and performative, representation and reality; she is the same person as O'Neill, but she is not a person at all. From this ontological position an ambivalent politics can arise – the ability to demand greater inclusion, yet still remain named/shamed as the performative queer. In relation to marriage as a structuring performative of the heterosexual matrix, the blurred boundary between performance and performativity inherent to drag takes on particular power, expanding the realm of the sexed and gendered possible in radical, elastic-snapping ways, even while performing the fiction that everything is stretching just fine. This is a more voluntarist performativity than Derrida or Butler theorized, but gay marriage puts us in a new moment. The deterministic set of rewards and punishments which imperceptibly cajoles and admonishes us into doing our genders right has changed. A greater heterogeneity of acts is rewarded; different queer acts are punished. The previously queer subject may feel little affinity with those who are now excluded. With these social sanctions loosened, and with the

historical revisability of performative citations surely recognizable as such to those who have lived through significant social change, the queer may become more performance, less performative. It could become a kind of drag.

Reform is radical when it affects the very roots of a system, when it calls into question the kinds of subjectivities and kinships rendered not only abject, but also impossible ("just" performance). O'Neill is the gay man – and, better, the HIV positive, kinky, cross-dressing gay man – abjected under heteronormativity; but after the gay marriage referendum, he can be named, rather than shamed, by the performative "I pronounce you." Bliss is the gigantic Dublin pub landlady who is not the marrying kind; marriage equality has not sufficiently shifted the invisible proscenium to account for her. In the aftermath of a transformative moment for queer subjectivities and politics, what happens if we ask of marriage not only "who is excluded?" but also, "can they be admitted?" And what happens to the presumptive force of the "I pronounce you" when they are? Panti Bliss still can't get hitched, but her marriage is closer to the realm of the possible. And at some point, the elastic must snap.

Notes

1. There is clearly a tension on the critical left between those who are wary of any increased state power or involvement in the realm of the family and those who believe that the state provides some support and benefits that we need to vigilantly guard against the encroaching individualist logic of neoliberalism and austerity. It is interesting that each side positions gay marriage as a potential ill – at once over- and under-involving the state in the lives of its citizens. If it seems unfair to accuse it of doing both, one might also suggest that it does not have to do either.

2. Sedgwick sees the straining of scholarly eyes "to ascertain whether particular performances (e.g. of drag) are really parodic and subversive" (Sedgwick, 1993: 15) as a "sadly premature domestication" (Sedgwick, 1993: 15) of Butler's performativity theory. The bottom line, as she sees it, is "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" (Sedgwick, 1993: 15). Conversely, Moya Lloyd (1999) expresses dissatisfaction with the change in trajectory vis-a-vis drag between *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. She argues that even if co-option by the heterosexist hegemony is always a possibility for drag, this does not "evacuate the need to distinguish between parodic political activity that reinforces the heterosexual matrix and that which threatens to subvert it" (Lloyd, 1999: 206). For Lloyd, protesting the uptake of Butler to endorse a "hyper-voluntarist gender politics" (Lloyd, 1999: 209) needn't mean turning politics and the politics of drag in particular into "an entirely haphazard endeavor" (Lloyd, 1999: 208).

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