

Kabren Levinson  
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## a "true" identity?

Actors play scripted roles. They represent the thoughts and beliefs of someone else, most often an author or a playwright. By performing a character, they create a new persona that is other than themselves. Actors act within specific spaces and at certain times. As actors, they step in and out of different roles. For example, an actor might even play two or three parts in one play. Actors work in theaters. In this spaces, they are outside of reality where they become someone else. Actors offer impersonations, for most of the time, they are not acting as themselves, but as someone or something else. They are recreating something that is not themselves.

Everybody who lives within a societal sphere is some sort of actor. We create identities within certain spaces, just as actors do. We are able to step in and out of some of these roles. For instance, a teacher may only be a teacher while in the classroom or at a school, and a firefighter might only fight fires while on duty. We define ourselves and others using constructed identities. The teacher and the firefighter are both, on the one hand, flexible identities. Gender, however is a constructed identity that has become solidified in and by society. While one is able to be and not to be a firefighter or a teacher, it is difficult for a cultured individual of the modern world to be able to let go of the construction of gender. While some say that gender is a purely biological feature of human existence, we have given this one purely physical denotation of being great cultural, social, political, and economic power.

Even though it has become more socially acceptable to forsake one's societal gender construction, we are still bound to our genders. I dress like a man partly because that is what my cultural and societal sphere tells me to do. We, as humans, are unable to step out of our socially and politically constructed gender roles. In this essay, I examine the social constructions of gender through woman, something I am quite inexpert about, as Nietzsche says. I feel it is necessary both as part of my examination of gender identity and as part of my own lack of knowledge of woman to identify myself as "other" to that which I am studying, creating, and deconstructing in this text. At the end of this essay, I will, however, return to ideas of internal versus external investigation. I understand that by examining woman, I am only subscribing to these constructions. I am doing so for the sake of and hope for woman.

*Does a "real" gender exist? Can a person possess a "true" identity apart from their own internal reality and consciousness? Should we return to nature and stop imposing the social sphere upon the natural bodily realm? Can "woman" be defined?*

I first look at how woman has been viewed as both foreign to and part of man. I then inspect whether or not woman can be defined. Next, I introduce the notion of gender consciousness and performance. Finally, I examine one way woman *can* create herself and I deconstruct my own role as a man and an outsider writing this essay. I will use the texts of various feminist thinkers, including Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Susan Griffin, Judith Butler, and Hélène Cixous. I seek to examine and show how feminist thinkers have defined and explicated woman, gender, and consciousness, in an effort to show how gender identity is not inherent, but rather how it is constructed and

how one understands herself through her actions within specific cultural, social, and political spheres.

## definition

In the context of Simone de Beauvoir's and Julia Kristeva's texts about defining woman, I will now offer a more "historical" account of woman's gender identity. In Beauvoir's essay on "Woman and Creativity," she looks at how women are an other to patriarchal society. In her text, she asks the question plainly: "Or is it the socially determined condition of women, confining them as it does to an inferior position, that influences their ability to act?" (Beauvoir 17). Beauvoir asserts that "women" are only socially constructed and this cultural creation has forced women to become subhuman. She also realizes that women do not choose to act within these boundaries, but that they are compelled to comply to certain restraints. Beauvoir continues to question what it means to be. She says that in order to have an impact in the modern world, one must be in control of his or herself. "...in order to be able to achieve anything at all, you must first of all belong to nobody to yourself" (Beauvoir 17-18). Beauvoir goes on to say that woman has not been independent and free, "but rather the property of their husbands and their children" (Beauvoir 18). Women are not allowed to exceed the norm. Women are pressed to comply to these social directions. Woman's capability "...to dare, to seek, [and] to invent..." has been destroyed. These hinderances are evidence that gender roles in civilized societies have always been constructed and not inherent to human beings. "One really cannot claim that, given equal opportunities, women do less well

than men, since opportunities really are not equal, nor have they ever been, and nowhere in the world today are they even remotely so" (Beauvoir 31). Women, as women, are constantly denied opportunities, while men are allowed to pursue their dreams.

Julia Kristeva takes Beauvoir's claims of woman's inequalities one step further. She asserts that woman cannot be defined and asks whether "being," in general, can even exist.

"The belief that 'one is a woman' is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that 'one is a man'...a woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it.'" (Kristeva 137)

To Kristeva, being a woman, or a man, for that matter, is not part of our existence as human beings. She says that feminist thinkers will always be struggling for a definition of themselves, but will never find the right answer. So far, Beauvoir and Kristeva see woman as a socially constructed part of man. Women is not allowed to be herself, for she is defined in and by others.

## consciousness and performance

In this next section, I try to offer a more modern analysis of gender construction through the ideas of consciousness and performance in the texts of Susan Griffin and Judith Butler, respectively. Susan Griffin speaks about man's obsession with imaginary definitions within imaginary spaces. In her essay "Curves Along the Road," she describes this dilemma as a divided awareness and existence. "In splitting spirit from

matter, human consciousness is divided. We think of intellectual knowledge as separate from from sensual knowledge, and the spirit as belonging to a different realm entirely" (Griffin 87). Griffin believes that the mental or spiritual world has been torn apart from the physical and natural world and asserts that the mental world has been glorified and associated with male achievement while the natural world is forsaken and connected to the feminine. She explains the world as being fragmented and in pieces. Griffin uses the inventions of physicists to give "insight into the social sphere to suggest that this fragmentary vision is expressed in the categories of gender, or masculine and feminine" (Griffin 87). These separate spheres represent the solidified social roles of man and woman, the very roles we are unable to separate ourselves from. She continues on to advocate for a reconnection to nature. "Consciousness is an integral part of nature. But we fail to understand this. We have stolen the soul from nature...In our worldview we imagine that only human beings have souls, not other natural creatures nor nature as a whole" (Griffin 88). By determining "sex" and "gender" in social (or the spiritual and male) spheres, we have separated ourselves from nature. Griffin believes that we have lost our natural wholeness and harmony by attempting to define the world in mental contexts. To Griffin, constructions of what is male and female fragment our existence. "We assign to the masculine the province of the soul, the spirit, or the transcendent, and we read the feminine as representing nature and the Earth" (Griffin 88). She says that men deal with what is beautiful about civilization while women are forced to put up with the filth of the Earth. In Griffin's eyes, we make these constructions in order to gain control over nature. "We are, in fact, devouring ourselves with our fear of natural power and our attempts to control it" (Griffin 89). Man has

assigned women to the natural because it is the Earth that is out of control. By constructing identity in the enlightened and spirited world, man has stolen the power woman had before she became a woman. Woman is a social construction that subdues her abilities as a human being. Griffin presents a case for socially constructed identity and explicates how it works.

While Susan Griffin paid attention to the more philosophical or spirited side of gender construction, Judith Butler actualizes these terms and presents a case for performed gender and identity. Butler first deconstructs the word "gender." She asserts that the word is not a noun, but rather, a verb. "...gender is not a noun...Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 34). Butler explicitly identifies gender as a performance. To Butler, gender is an expression and should not even be classified as identity. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, she even cites the ideas of Nietzsche, a philosopher who offered brutal and scathing accounts and definitions of woman. She quotes his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where he asserts that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed - the deed is everything" (Nietzsche 45). Just as actors put on a presentation and impersonation of a character that does not *really* exist, Nietzsche says that identity is created by what is done, and that in fact, nothing exists behind this mask of actions. Butler more clearly understands and translates Nietzsche's ideas into the context of gender construction: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expression' that are said to be its results" (Butler 34). Butler, too, believes that a "true" identity does not exist, but

instead, one's actions within a certain sphere do not mean more than the action itself (just as actors only act within a theater and step out of character when they go off stage - actors, most likely, do not truly believe in their parts so much that they are compelled to construct an identity surrounding a certain role). We act within different spaces that determine how we behave. In society, though, we are forced to take our performed roles to heart. Judith Butler believes in no real identity. It is our actions that matter. There is no "doer," only a "deed" (Butler 34).

## discord and conversation

Even though Susan Griffin believes not that we should perform in certain roles and instead says that we should return to nature, and Judith Butler asserts that true identity does not exist, Hélène Cixous believes that woman can and must create herself. I will now attempt to put Cixous in conversation with Butler's drastically oppositional views. Cixous believes that woman should be. In her essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, she speaks about how women write and how a woman's writing can define woman.

"Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement." (Cixous 245)

Cixous clearly believes and has trust in an identity that is woman. She not only believes that identity can exist, but she strongly advocates for the creation of self. Cixous offers

an alternative self-identification for woman. She says that woman can recreate herself away from the already existing male and patriarchal constructions of gender. Cixous believes that woman must insert her *self* into history. Woman can not sit by and depend on the philosophies of men. Women must learn to speak and enter into dialogue with man.

Judith Butler would strongly disagree with Cixous' proposal. Butler does not believe in any gender identity or construction and has wholly separated herself from the very male dominated patriarchal systems, structures, and constructions Cixous wants women to infiltrate. Should woman totally remove herself from societal understandings of gender identity, or should she instead try to penetrate these structures by identifying herself?

insider? outsider?

One should ask what is the significance of internal versus external dialogue, particularly in the context of women's identity. Throughout the majority of time, until recently, women have been created and understood in and by the minds of man. Cixous says that woman should finally create herself in her voice, while Butler completely dismisses constructions of gender. In this essay, I have only included the testimony of "female" or "women" feminist thinkers. It is important to count the testimony of woman and I have tried to offer her the chance to create herself. However, what does this testimony matter?

By trying to open a space for *female* feminist discourse on gender construction, I am only perpetuating the patriarchal societal gender systems and spaces. Part of me even wants to entirely discredit my account of woman, for it has been defined by a man. Even though I have represented women's writing, I have done so with the hand and the pen of a man! Why should my own account of woman matter, since I am writing that which I am not?

### a thought in (un)resolution

In order to truly live our lives we must step away from the spheres of society that force us to construct identities. We must stop defining ourselves and finally live our lives in peace. Gender constructions have destroyed our worlds. The most persuasive account of the self was offered by Susan Griffin, for it was not as radical as Judith Butler's ideas, but made greater statements about what we should do with identity than Beauvoir or Kristeva. Griffin recognized the constructions of masculine and feminine, while still trusting nature, the last true "thing." Woman has been defined by her connection to the earth. Gender has been constructed out of fear for the physical and the natural. We, men, are scared of the Earth.

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