

Esperando al Puerto: Waiting at the Door of Kinship, Gender, and Performance

Elizabeth Bell

This essay argues, through theory, personal narrative, and photographs, that we experience our genders in cultural moments as sites of struggle, as becomings that always occur in relation to law and normative conventions, and as epiphanies that include and implicate kinship circles. Struggle, normativity, and kinship are operative and constitutive terms for the performativity of gender. Performativity's genesis in feminist theory, however, needs to be recuperated 1) to remember women's bodies as the paradigmatic ground for gender theory, and 2) to argue for feminism's importance to the politics of gender theory. Struggle, normativity, and kinship are my key terms in this recollection and argument.

Judith Butler offers two very different genesis stories, published ten years apart, for her conception of the performativity of gender. The first story is offered in the introduction to *Bodies That Matter*:

I originally took my clue on how to read the performativity of gender from Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka's "Before the Law." There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. (pp. xiv-xv)

The second story locates her epiphany in a much different scene, creating a much different persona:

. . . the only way to describe me in my younger years was as a bar dyke who spent her days reading Hegel and her evenings, well, at the gay bar, which occasionally became a drag bar. And I had some relatives who were, as it were, in the life, and there was some important identification with those "boys." So I was there, undergoing a cultural moment in the midst of a social and political struggle. But I also experienced in that moment a certain implicit theorization of gender: it quickly dawned on me that some of these so-called men could do femininity much better than I ever could, ever wanted to, ever would. And so I was confronted by what could only be called the transferability of the attribute. Femininity, which I understood never to have

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belonged to me anyway, was clearing [sic] belonging elsewhere, and I was happier to be the audience to it, have always been very happier to be its audience than I ever was or would be being the embodiment of it. (*Undoing Gender*, p. 213)

Read together, the two narratives link philosophic theories with life experiences, wonder and epiphany with waiting, and gender's production with scenes of control and desire. The heuristic value of these stories for gender theory is apparent: we experience our genders in "cultural moments" as sites of struggle, as becomings that always occur in relation to law and normative conventions, and as epiphanies that include and implicate kinship circles. Struggle, normativity, and kinship are operative and constitutive terms for performativity of gender.

But they are also operative and constitutive terms for feminism, and I'm worried that feminism is losing purchase as theoretical ground, analytical tool, and political praxis for performance studies in Communication. When new performance books arrive in the mail, I eagerly search the table of contents, then the index, for signs of feminist life. When *Text and Performance Quarterly* arrives four times a year, I flip through the pages, noting keywords and works cited, hoping to find new articles to use in my graduate class, *Feminism and Performance*. When the National Communication Association's convention program is published each year, I study each performance panel's title and description, searching for the "F" word. Maybe I'm just paranoid, but, with very few exceptions, feminism seems to have dropped off the performance studies radar in Communication.

Performativity, on the other hand, is everywhere. Our books, journals, and convention panels make fruitful use of the term to explore materiality, constitution of subjects, and normative boundaries of gender, sex, race, ethnicity, class, and abilities. This exploration is important and commendable.

Performativity's genesis in feminist theory, however, needs to be recuperated 1) to remember women's bodies as the paradigmatic ground for gender theory, and 2) to argue for feminism's importance to the politics of gender theory. Struggle, normativity, and kinship are my key terms in this recollection and argument.

To accomplish those two very tall orders, I begin with a definition of kinship and utilize three performance studies' explorations of kinship as exemplars. Then I lace stories of my family's cultural moments, one birthing story, and early forays in feminist theory to trace gender theory's roots in feminism. Kinship—a key term for family, performativity, and feminism—centers the life and politics of all.

Defining Kinship and Its Explorations in Performance Studies

Butler defines kinship in her brilliant chapter "Is Kinship Always Heterosexual?" in this way.

If we understand kinship as a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death, then kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional

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dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few).
(*Undoing Gender*, p. 102-103)

Many disciplines—anthropology, sociology, folklore, history, primatology, biology—have made kinship a cornerstone in their “study of man.” Kinship is observable in the field in empirical ways, it constitutes discursive boundaries that can be traced in language and kinship terms, and it is considered a key to social, economic, and political organization.

Even performance studies is in the kinship act. Kristen Langellier and Eric Peterson’s *Storytelling in Daily Life* (2004) is very much about kinship produced in and through in family stories and kinwork. They explore how storytelling “produces that which it purports to represent” by excluding certain topics and people (“exiles from kinship”) in their production of “good families.” Della Pollock’s *Telling Stories, Telling Birth* (1999) puts birthing stories into conversation with performativity producing “good mothers.” The leap to contemporary kinship debates—gay marriage, reproductive technologies, and the fears of opening up kinship circles to alternative family practices—is an easy one. If Langellier and Peterson and Pollock make kinship explicit, then Jay Baglia’s *The Viagra Adventure* (2005) whispers kinship on every page in its examination of how Pfizer’s print and television advertising of Viagra turns the hydraulics of erection into “happy marriages” and “fulfilling relationships” in the discourses of masculinity.

Kinship and performativity are intricately linked to gender’s complex production. How we come to be, know, act, and interact with others in social and political systems *not* of our own making, but malleable through performance, is the essence of family.

Kinship Story Installment 1: It’s a Girl!

I still find it disconcerting when a pregnant woman, say five months along, tells me, “It’s a boy!” When I was pregnant with my first child in 1978, amniocentesis and sonograms were fairly new, exotic procedures, and certainly beyond the budget, technological capacity, and expertise of the small, rural medical clinic I visited in those months. Back when I did it the old fashioned way, the question was “When are you due?” not “What are you having?”

So the anticipation had reached its peak when the nurse—leaning over the doctor’s shoulder—emitted an aaahhh sound: gentle, barely audible, flavored with a hint of apology, as the pitch trailed downward. She quietly, but resolutely, announced, “It’s a girl.” No need to apologize, I wanted to laugh, as relief washed over me after all those months of worry. Thank God, it’s a girl.

I knew, in my heart of hearts, that had this baby been a boy, his father would take as his life’s singular mission the project of making this boy a man. In turn, my life’s mission would be to monitor, to ameliorate, and to undo this damage. Thank God. It’s a girl.

Twenty years later, I read Judith Butler's (1993) description of that "It's a girl" moment:

In that naming, the girl is 'girled,' brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that 'girling' of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalizing effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (*Bodies That Matter*, pp. 7-8)

My initial relief, I was soon to learn, was short lived.

Miranda weighed five pounds and eleven ounces, tiny compared to the next baby born in this little country hospital. He was a "bruiser" of a boy at almost thirteen pounds. I shared a room with his mother, and she and her husband joked good-naturedly about Miranda's tiny size. Miranda's father, however, took exception to the teasing and joking when I (stupidly) told him about it. He came to the hospital the next day wearing a pair of crepe-soled shoes I'd never seen before. "Boxing shoes," he said, gesturing contemptuously to the empty bed across the room, "just in case I have to fight that guy."

I bowed my head and shook it slowly, lacking both the confidence to confront him and the language to articulate my frustration and heartbreak. The founding interpellation, "It's a girl," may have saved me from one impossible mission, but it also located all of us in the continuing history of gender sanctions, prohibitions, and taboos just as difficult. Miranda's father's senseless defensiveness and readiness for violence in the name of "that naming" was a boundary, a norm for gendered, raced, and classed performance—his, mine, and Miranda's—that has been and would be repeated many times. Not even a day old, Miranda's interpolation in Gayle Rubin's sex/gender system was in full swing.

Feminist Theory and Gender: Sex/Gender System

The separation of sex/gender was an important moment in feminist theory and continues today in commonsense notions of sex as a biological designation and gender as social expectations for masculine and feminine. Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women: The Political Economy of Sex," published in 1975, proposed that separation to better enable theorization of how sex/gender is the "set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity" (p. 156).

The body as an essential biological fact troubled feminism for more than a century. First wave liberal U.S. feminism was—in great measure—a response to woman's body as *the* justification for exclusions from political, social, economic, and educational realms: white, middle-class women were too physically weak, too emotionally volatile, too "undone" by biology to participate in public life. When

Rubin proposed to separate sex and gender, second wave feminism was able to attend to, not that troublesome body, but the socially constructed norms and expectations that created material conditions, historical moments, and cultural pressures borne by women. In short, the separation of sex from gender allowed feminists to point to social constructions as the source of women's oppression, not biological destiny.

In 1984, Rubin advocated further separation of sex from gender:

Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice. I am now arguing that it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to more accurately reflect their separate social existence. ("Thinking Sex," p. 308)

Six years later, three important works took to task the sex/gender system, their "separate social existence," and the system's value for feminism: Teresa deLauretis' *Technologies of Gender* (1987), Eve Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Each work questions the sex/gender division for its problematic construction of sex—body, biology, reproduction—as deterministic, fixed, ahistorical, universal, and as a foundation for claims about women; each questions the too easy designation of socially constructed gender as learned, taught, malleable, culturally variable, and historically dependent.

For deLauretis, the terms sex and gender lock feminist thought in the very terms that center patriarchy (man and woman) and bind the terms in oppositional ways (dominant vs. minority). Those patriarchal and oppositional terms are traps for feminism: they don't enable exploration of differences among women or within the same woman.

DeLauretis proposes four interlocking claims to loosen these traps: "1) gender is (a) representation; 2) representation of gender is a construction; 3) the construction of gender goes on as busily today as it did in earlier times; and 4) the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction" (p. 3). Representation, as construction, is always ideological; gender's function is to place subjects in systems of representation that "operate by mystification, imaginary relation, wool over one's eyes" (p. 9). For deLauretis, then, the subject of feminism as a theoretical construct, is "a way of conceptualizing, of understanding, of accounting for certain processes, not women" (p. 10).

Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* also took on the sex/gender system, not as locked in patriarchal terms, but as locked in heterosexuality. For Sedgwick, sex/gender can offer purchase for feminist critique of oppressive social systems based on biology. Sexuality—the missing third term in the paired system of sex/gender—falls outside both categories unless anchored to masculine and feminine terms within heterosexuality. Such anchoring makes gay and lesbian critique difficult if not impossible. Sedgwick writes, "I am eager to promote the obsolescence of 'essentialist/constructivist' because I am very dubious about the ability of even the most scrupulously gay-affirmative thinkers to divorce these terms" (p. 40).

Heterosexuality is the basis for claims about both nature (sex) and nurture (gender); and all claims “take place against a very unstable background of tacit assumptions and fantasies” about both terms. If deLauretis proposed to study the processes of representation of gender as a feminist project, then Sedgwick proposed to utilize feminist frameworks to argue, not for the constructivism of sexual identity, but for the “irresolvable” instability of the categories heterosexual and homosexual: “To understand these conceptual relations as irresolvably unstable is not, however, to understand them as inefficacious and innocuous” (10).

Butler’s *Gender Trouble* builds a case that also radically upsets the sex/gender system. Beginning with the feminist “we” and the universal category “woman,” Butler questions the ontological ground of any “subject” of feminism within the sex/gender system. Moving away from foundations for gender in biology, constructionism, psychology, and sexual difference, Butler argues that gender—across these foundational approaches—is always already framed as binary, hierarchy, and compulsory heterosexuality. This triptych is important: gender is always named as either masculine or feminine (binary); the masculine is always placed above the feminine (hierarchy); and compulsory heterosexuality (proscribed by discourses of law, family, church, and education) secures that hierarchical binary in material ways. With those three moves, Butler arrives at gender as a cultural performance, not “natural”—whatever ones posits “nature” to be. The parody of drag exposes the fiction of any foundation for gender in biology or social construction.

DeLauretis, Sedgwick, and Butler challenged the implications of separating sex and gender, offered reconceptualizations of processes of materiality and history for feminist theory, and laid the groundwork for performativity and queer theory as productive alternatives to foundational ways of constituting gender. But I don’t think we’ve paid sufficient attention to how important the sex/gender system, in its historical moment, was, or what it was able to achieve for feminist theory.

The separation of sex/gender achieved three simultaneous ends: 1) to absent women’s problematic bodies, 2) to privilege social constructions, and 3) to obscure heteronormativity. All three ends were efficacious for white, straight women fighting for access to education, employment, and equality with white, straight men. Absence, privilege, and obfuscation, however, are not productive routes for any feminist project aimed at social justice. To remember performativity’s and queer theory’s genesis in feminist theory, however, is to remember that questions about women’s bodies—in trouble, out of the closet, and mystified through processes of representation in science, medicine, the law, and the church—are by no means settled. These questions continue to circulate around kinship, technology, and reproduction for gender theory and in my life.

Kinship Story Installment 2: Saved by Kinship and Theory

Leaving the MA program, getting married, moving to a “farm” on ten acres in Bastrop, Texas, and having a baby all in my 24th year were difficult. To say the least.

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My husband worked in Austin, and he was gone from 6:30 in the morning until 7:30 at night. Miranda and I settled into a rural domesticity, and she grew. Our house was 25 miles from anything in any direction: grocery stores, gas stations, movie theaters, libraries. The weather, as all rural folk can testify, determined my life. When the well froze in the winter, there was no water. When the summer temperatures hit 100 with no air conditioning, we learned to find ways to stay cool. We'd sit on the front porch and talk to the clouds. "Come on rain!" Anything to break the heat.



While I had the privilege of caring for my baby without worrying about earning money to live, I was also emotionally and physically abandoned to and with her in those years, and I know in my heart of hearts that kinship saved my life. My parents lived in Austin, 45 minutes from our homestead. Daddy (all white Texans—no matter what age, call their fathers “Daddy”) had retired the year before. My mother, a formidable R.N.—not unlike Nurse Ratchett of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, but who does “power with,” not “power over”—continued to work outside the home. And daddy took over all the domestic chores in their house. Not a big leap for him. His mother owned a diner in Cherokee County, Kansas, and Daddy was quite the short order cook.

Most every weekday—around 8am—he’d come through my front door. We’d drink coffee. He’d hold the baby. Anyone who has been the single caretaker of a baby knows how important it is for someone else to hold the baby. And we’d plan our day. Through the years, we planted an acre garden, mowed the half-acre front yard, dug fence posts, planted trees. By afternoon, too hot to work outside, we’d nap and watch *General Hospital* (those were the Luke and Laura days). In the winter, we’d chop wood, paint rooms, lay tile, clean out closets, and watch *General Hospital*.



Daddy was there for Miranda's first steps, her first haircut, her thousandth step, and her hundredth pony ride. He was her first caretaker who was not her meal ticket to the breast, and he took to that caretaking with his whole heart. Together we cared for Miranda and for each other—laughing, talking, working, depending on and supporting each other. We did this for three years.

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When the crops ripened, he'd load up his pick-up truck with produce from the garden to drive back to Austin. He'd drop off tomatoes, green beans, watermelons, and cantaloupe at the neighborhood Texaco station. Bostick and Schroeder's Texaco was a neighborhood gathering place, and Mr. Schroeder actually pumped the gas. Folks soon learned to stop in for fresh produce and drop their change in the coffee can. In the directory compiled for my tenth high school reunion, I listed my occupation (and I am not making this up) as "truck farmer." In three years, the \$1,000 from that coffee can went into a money market account in Miranda's name. In 1999, she started graduate school with \$20,000. But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

In 1981, Miranda went off to preschool at three years old, Daddy continued to farm, and I (at my mother's insistence, you remember the efficacious Nurse Ratchett?) went back to graduate school. This time working on my PhD at the University of Texas at Austin. I signed up for a graduate class in the Philosophy Department. The course schedule read, "Discourse Theory: Wittgenstein, Austin, Burke." At the time, I was reading Kenneth Burke by myself, using dramatism as a lens for my dissertation in performance of literature. I knew I needed help—who doesn't with Burke?—and this class seemed to offer just that.



The evening of the first class, I strolled into Waggoner Hall—one of the original buildings on campus with soaring 20 foot ceilings, leaded glass windows, heavy wood paneling climbing inside walls, and requisite ivy climbing the outside. Home of the Philosophy Department, permanent signs mounted on the walls read, “Quiet Please. Offices Are Studies.” Like Dorothy tornadoed out of Kansas, I knew I wasn’t in the Speech Department anymore.

Schooled in theories and practices of literary criticism and performance of literature, I was unprepared for Wittgenstein’s place in the tradition of analytic philosophy and symbolic logic. But I endured two weeks of the *Blue and Brown Books*, wondering all the while what the fuss was about.

Then we started J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words*. I still own the copy I read more than twenty years ago.

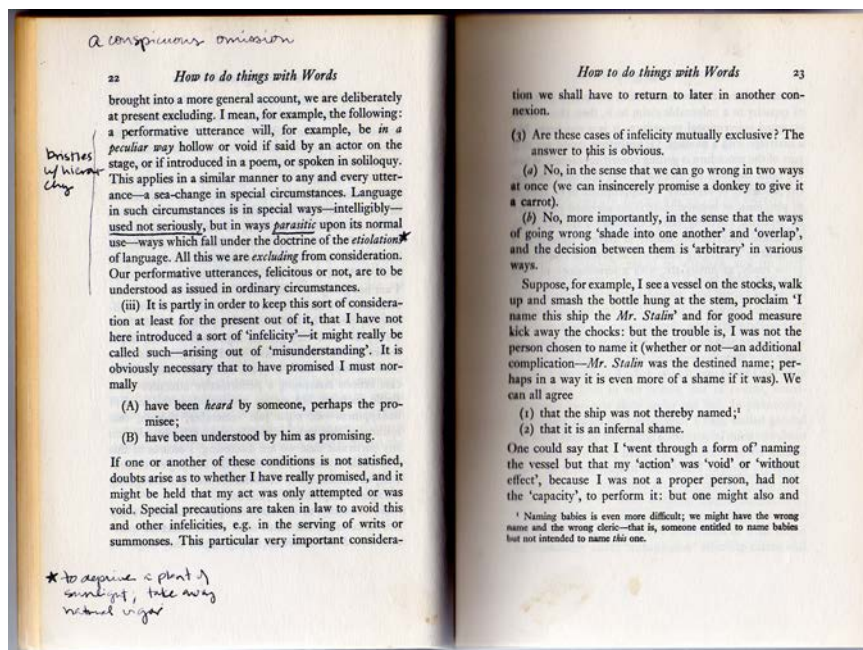
In Lecture I, Austin introduces the performative as a class of utterances that “do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, are not ‘true or false;” instead, “the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action” (1962/1975, p. 5). With four simple examples (“I do” of the wedding ceremony, “I name this ship,” “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother,” “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow”), Austin isolates the performative in which “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (1962/1975, p. 5).

So far so good.

In Lecture II, however, Austin made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up because I was suddenly both implicated by and excluded from the performative.

. . . a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. . . . Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolation* of language.” (1962/1975, italics in original, p. 22)

How could he speak of what I did—I was a performer, I studied poetry, I often spoke “in soliloquy” on stage—as hollow or void? Even (gasp) parasitic? Gathering myself, I did what any good graduate student would do.



I drew a line parallel to this passage in the margin, and underlined the phrase “used not seriously” and the word “parasitic.” Because I was a good Burkean, I wrote in the margin “bristles with hierarchy.” At the bottom of the page, I wrote the definition of etiolation from Webster’s Dictionary: to deprive a plant of sunlight; take away natural vigor. At the top of the page, I wrote in my best, serious, graduate student tone: “a conspicuous omission.”

Little did I know that Jacques Derrida would also find this omission conspicuous. His critique (1988) of Austin’s performative became the center of Derrida’s theory of citationality: all language is derivative, all language is always and already “quoted” and “quotable.” Theatrical utterances, then, are not outside “ordinary” language use, but testify to the very condition of language as always,

already severed from context. Little did I know that Judith Butler (1990) would locate in the performative—as both non-referential and dramatic—the space and agency for subversion of laws, and the space and agency for acts that do gender differently. Little did I know that Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick (1995) would also pick up on etiolation and performativity’s association with the theater since Oscar Wilde—and queerness—as depraved, effete, perverted, unnatural.

But I’m getting ahead of myself again. If these theories of language and gender came later, then in 1981, the practice of gendered kinship saved my life. In the mundane acts of domesticity, child care, and productivity (and I do mean produce), Daddy did gendered kinship differently. With him in mind, I return again to Butler’s definition of kinship:

kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few). (*Undoing Gender*, pp. 102-103)

If Miranda’s father performed gendered kinship violently to fulfill and to reaffirm heteronormative masculinity, then Miranda’s grandfather and grandmother did kinwork in queerly feminist ways: certainly without understanding how their kinship acts were both queer—as in making strange what is thought to be “natural” and questioning received knowledge, and feminist—as in proactive movement to claim self.

And I recall the operative and constitutive terms of this essay and my claims: We experience our genders in cultural moments as sites of struggle, as becomings that always occur in relation to law and normative conventions, and as epiphanies that include and implicate kinship circles. Struggle, normativity, and kinship. When Daddy walked in my front door at 8am each morning, he performed gendered kinship differently.

To return Butler’s original story—that we wait outside the door of the law for its authority to produce and install its effects—then kinship is also performatively constituted. We wait outside the door of the law for its authority to produce and install kinship’s effects. Or, as I’ve phrased it, “*Esperando al Puerto*,” in the title of this essay. In Spanish, the infinitive verb “esperar” means both to wait and to hope. Perhaps—when kinship and kinwork disappoints us, traps us, judges us, exiles us from the state, the church, and the family—we’re not just waiting at the door, but hoping for something better? For laws of kinship that name and recognize many, many forms and expressions of human dependency?

Miranda and I waited and hoped each morning for Daddy to walk in the door. And he did—as caretaker and kin, working and reworking the norms of gender and kinship.

Feminist Theory and Gender Theory: When Assumptions Diverge

If gender theory has its genesis in the problematic woman's body, its representation, and its links to heterosexuality, then gender theory ought to remember women. Log in to most any electronic library database and type the word "gender" as a search term. The hits will number in the thousands, covering an immense range of disciplines, methodologies, and issues. The implicit and explicit assumptions about gender in these works, however, will accomplish two very different ends: 1) to further theory and praxis in libratory social justice projects or 2) to deflect attention from women, people of color, queers, heternormativity and the very systems that create oppressive gender categories.

Carolyn diPalma explains the first approach to gender:

In its more libratory moments, gender studies may imply the broad and important realm of the complex production and performance of femininity and masculinity, the labyrinthine relations between and among women and men, and effects of these on erotic practices and expectations. Gender studies may meaningfully draw attention to the arrogance of assuming only two basic categories—male/female; men/women; masculine/feminine—for everyone on the planet. ¶ 3

So Butler names the New Gender Politics as a struggle "with presumptions about bodily dimorphism, the uses and abuses of technology, and the contested status of the human, and of life itself?" (*Undoing Gender*, p. 11). For Butler, gender is the constitution and interpolation of normative boundaries with tremendously high stakes for sexual minorities, reproductive technologies, intrasexed and transsexual communities, and for attending to the ways that "gender trouble," "gender blending," "transgender" or "cross-gender" are testimonies to gender as already "moving beyond" the naturalized male/female categories (*Undoing Gender*, pp. 42-3). At the heart of these libratory projects is the assumption that gender is "a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone" (Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 29).

"Written in stone," however, is at the heart of the second route gender studies takes in these thousands of database hits. Gender studies can operate as radically conservative knowledge production, especially when knowledge effects mask women, race and ethnicity, class, nationalisms, geographies, sexualities, and generations.

Gender studies may point to the importance of maintaining the naturalization of two separate categories, limit itself to the documentation and cataloging of their presence, and to the danger of their disruption. In other words, with gender as a primary or singular focus, the significant and disturbing conditions of women's lives often disappear. (diPalma ¶ 3)

At this end of the spectrum, gender is a regressive and conservative term. Joan Scott (1988) names gender as the term that "seems to fit within the scientific terminology of

social science and thus dissociates itself from the (supposedly strident) politics of feminism. In this usage, 'gender' does not carry with it a necessary statement about inequality or power nor does it name the aggrieved (and hitherto invisible) party" (p. 31). In *Technologies of Gender*, deLauretis anticipates the ways that some social science projects will take up gender "by androgynizing it (claiming the same experience of material conditions for both genders in a given class, race, or culture)" (p. 3). Eve Sedwick calls this branch of gender studies, "feminist studies minus feminism," as if we could study gender without analysis and critique of gender inequality, oppression, and struggle.

Gender then is both a naming of a radical site of struggle and a thoroughly conservative effort to contain difference in the erasure of politics, materiality, and histories of oppressions. If feminist work divided sex from gender in 1975 only to question later the dubious consequences of that division, then gender theory plus feminism plus thirty-five years can be the place where we make new and important distinctions: 1) instead of absenting women's problematic bodies, we should think of all bodies as problematic, as sites of struggle in cultural moments; 2) instead of privileging social constructions, we should attend to historical, material, and social constructions of gender becomings in and through the law; 3) instead of obscuring heteronormativity, we should question and resist heteronormativity's violence and perform kinship in "queerly feminist" ways.

Kinship Story Final Installment: Shifting Kinwork

But my parents couldn't save themselves from the history and materiality of one particularly heteronormative masculine performance. Miranda was ten years old, and I was pregnant with my second child. Daddy was sick in bed all day—not feeling good, terrible gut pains, not calling a doctor, waiting it out. He did what men of his generation were supposed to do: he gut it up. Even my mother, who is the best diagnostician I know, couldn't figure out what was wrong.

At 10:30 that night, they went to the emergency room. A ruptured appendix. Daddy lay in bed all day with a ruptured appendix. We learned that this often presents in older people as a diffuse pain through the belly, not the stabbing, isolated pain we usually associate with appendicitis.

They operated, cleaned him out, loaded him with antibiotics, and a week later—on Father's Day—sent him home. My new husband and I brought Daddy a watermelon.

Days later, at home, he threw a postoperative clot and suffered a massive stroke. Back to the hospital, he was comatose for ten days, and the family held vigil in the Critical Care waiting room. We waited and hoped at the door of the law, for my mother—the state recognized next of kin—insisted "No LEO," no extraordinary efforts to save his life. My brothers and I concurred. On July 1, 1987, he died.

And so the kinwork shifted—from illness to dying, from birthing to death, from childcare to fundamental forms of human dependency. And we continued to wait at

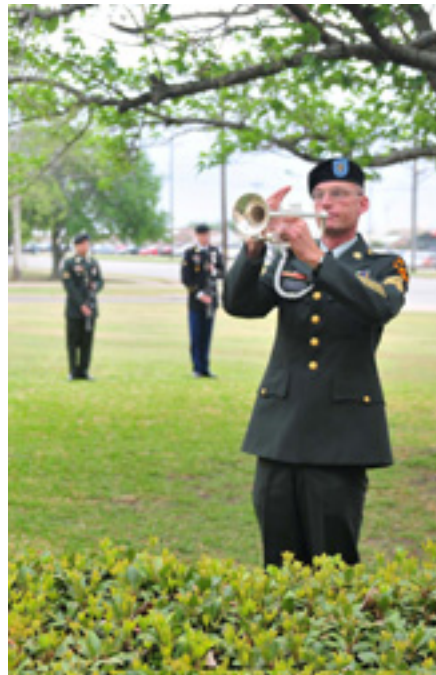
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the door of the law. As we planned the funeral, my mother, the legal widow—recognized by the state as “next of kin,” had the help of the U.S. Army and a Grievance Officer, who handled all the funeral arrangements.

As a decorated veteran of World War II and a career army officer, my father, Lt. Col. Bill Bell (Ret.), was to be buried at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, with full military honors. The pomp and ritual of a military funeral includes a color guard and 21-gun salute, the duet playing of taps (one bugler at the grave site, the second some distance away as an eerie echo), a flag draped coffin, and the presentation of that same flag to the primary next of kin. PNOK. The Army has acronyms for everything. Even kin.



As military law and conventions attended to all of us (which is understandable given its very real responsibility in producing many, many deaths), my father also attended to the military—its unwritten laws and conventions. You see, the joke in the Army is you can only die on the first or last day of the month. Otherwise, you really screw up your pay schedule, its bookkeeping, and the issuing of paychecks. For families caught in that terrible financial red tape, that joke is no joke. The date of death in the military has tremendously painful and real consequences for families.



As it dawned on her that day, my mother said, “Oh my God. It’s July 1st. Daddy died on the first of the month.” And it was an epiphany for the entire family filled with laughter and wonder—something we needed just then. This epiphany was two-fold: that my father held on for ten days and died on July 1st; that he continued to do queerly feminist kinwork—even in the heartland of heteronormative masculinity, the U.S. Army—to safeguard and to ease our journey without him. Indeed, we experience our genders in cultural moments as sites of struggle, as becomings that always occur in relation to law and normative conventions, and as epiphanies that include and implicate kinship circles.

Elizabeth Bell



When the American flag is presented to the primary next of kin, the people who receive the flag come from every corner of American life. But the ritual acts and words are always the same. The U.S. Army’s representative, following military protocol, kneels in front of the seated family member, holds out the folded flag, and speaks these words: “This flag is presented on behalf of a grateful nation and the United States Army as a token of appreciation for your loved one’s honorable and faithful service.”

As I remember the soldier presenting the flag to my mother, I think it’s the kneeling that gets to me the most. As if this institution of the state acknowledges—in this cultural moment—its massive and violent culpability, and humbles itself. And while the flag is a token of that humility, culpability, and violence, it is also passed

with the care and gentleness usually reserved for a newborn. The words remind me of the promises that kin—in all their configurations—whisper to babies. Words about honor and faithfulness, love and service.



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Notes on Images

Family photographs on pages 7, 8, 9, 10, and 18 are printed with permission of Miranda Blaeuer. I took the photo of my marked-up copy of *How to Do Things with Words*. Photos of the U.S. Army's funeral ritual are courtesy of U.S. Army. Photographer credits and context are as follows:

Page 15, top: Members of the New York Honor Guard team simulate a funeral service during the 2010 Army National Guard Honor Guard competition at Fort Snelling, Minn., Sept. 23, 2010. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. John Orrell/Released).

Page 15, bottom: Members of the 3rd U.S. Infantry, "The Old Guard," perform a 21-gun salute, during a funeral at Arlington National Cemetery, Va (photo by U.S. Army).

Page 16: U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Andrew Phelps plays Taps during the memorial service honoring Spc. Justin Richardson at Fort Hood, Texas, April 7, 2011. Phelps is a bugler with the 1st Cavalry Division Band. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Quentin Johnson/Released).

Page 17, top: Warrant Officer 1 Demetrius Selby, of the Colorado Army National Guard Honor Guard, presents the American flag to Shirley Rogers, the great-granddaughter of Army Sgt. George Wilker, at the end of a military funeral honors ceremony at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver Aug. 5, 2011. The ceremony was to honor Wilker, an African-American Soldier who fought for his freedom with the 17th United States Colored Troops during the Civil War. (U.S. Army Photo by Spc. Bethany Fehringer, Colorado National Guard/RELEASED)

Page 17, bottom: Maj. Gen. Simeon Trombitas, commanding general, United States Army South, presents the U.S. flag to Jette Buhl-Smith during funeral services March 17 at the Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery for her husband Army Maj. Gen. Homer Smith. Smith, a Texas native who was born in Breckenridge in 1922, was 89 at the time of his death. He served in the U.S. Army for more than 33 years in a career that included service during World War II, Korea and Vietnam. (Photo by Esther Garcia).

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