

## **Performing unseen identities: a feminist strategy for radical communication**

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When I think about the moments over the last year that have taken the joy out of resistance for me, they involve hoping to build a group of people to work with and instead having to struggle within my own community just to be seen as somebody who is poor, who is an immigrant and who is trying to raise a child. We must accept that in groups even where people look the same, there are diverse identities that shape people's privilege and reality. Class and culture like gender are not fixed. They are performed. As activists, feminists, survivors and fighters we need to include the staging of these in order to invert an artificial view of the homogeneity of the spaces where we meet. This will help us to create systems and resources to profoundly support each other so every person can contribute to their highest potential.

We gather in idealistic spaces which we hope to enter with our best selves, but something is holding back these spaces from reaching their full potential. Noticing the things that are not working in the places where we gather is potentially a rich and radically motivating exploration

### **Where we gather**

Meetings. It seems that the foundations of radical social change are built on meetings of groups of people to talk and make plans. Who comes to meetings?<sup>1</sup> Often meetings are filled with "activists". Activist is often a term for somebody centrally involved in a social movement, but as there is a continuous desire to involve more people in organizing and change, so meetings are realistically not comprised solely of activists but include a diversity of people from all walks of life. More often than not this can result in differences in understanding (and opinion) around the definitions and practices of feminism, sexism, patriarchy, and systemic misogyny (as well as consensus, class, and anarchy).

These differences may be rooted in the tension within feminism around the critique of essentialism on the one hand and the tendency in horizontal movements to erase privilege on the other. People inside the feminist movement have grappled both critically and personally with the catch 22 situation that as soon as you assert that "society should stop oppressing women", "women" instantly become a group of people who share the same traits. While the experience of sexism, sexual discrimination, misogyny and exhaustion at having to live within patriarchal institutions is felt and experienced by most females in

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<sup>1</sup> The current culture of holding meetings on weekday evenings systematically excludes people who are raising children. If parents and carers are to be included at the core, organizing crèches and child friendly meetings should be fully integrated into the culture of social movements, not only as the responsibility of people who care for children.

some form, "women" are so diverse that mapping experiences onto feminist theory and practice is not easy or clear. The desire to map personal experience onto larger statements about the nature of "women" results in something that can be termed essentialism. What exactly is essentialism? According to Alison Stone:

The (false) universalisation of claims about women in effect casts particular forms of feminine experience as the norm, and, typically, it is historically and culturally privileged forms of femininity that become normalised in this way. Essentialist theoretical moves thereby end up replicating between women the very patterns of oppression and exclusion that feminism should contest. (2004, 41)

False universalisation is experienced on the ground in the day-to-day decision-making and actions that go on in political movements, social centres, community gardens, and a myriad of grass-roots projects that are embedded with in the movement for social change. This has the impact of excluding all those women who do not share this experience and position. Whilst giving voice to one performance of gender it excludes and silences many others.

My question is how can these patterns of oppression, exclusion and silencing be dismantled and replaced. I want to look at the Class and Feminism workshop that took place during the DIY Feminist Festival this year in Manchester as an example of a model that could be used to subvert essentialism and its resulting exclusions. I would like to look at what can be borrowed from queer theory - a critical framework which emerged in the 1990s which has been used to dismantle the binary construction of male and female and hetero and homo sexual - to shore up the idea that class, like gender, is performative, not fixed but a complexity of human actions and reactions that only exist when they are enacted.

Understanding the performativity of class can then serve as a bridge to thinking about the idea of performing other unseen identities and how this might disrupt exclusionary spaces and open the possibility of authentic communication and inclusion. It will also enable an exploration of the effect of not performing personal narrative has on the self and the communities of resistance that we participate in.

Finally, I will look at horizontal models of organization and decision-making used within grass-roots social justice movements and question if these inadvertently produce an essentialist notion of "activism" and "activist". Can the processes modelled at the DIY Feminist Festival serve as an example for how to subvert such essentialism through the systematic performance of both marginalized and mainstream identities?

### **Class and feminism as a model**

The DIY Feminist Festival was organized by Feminist Action, a group of people who were involved in the Manchester University occupations and decided to organize themselves around feminist and gender issues. The Festival consisted of two days of workshops and was attended by over 100 people.

The workshop on class and feminism was convened by Carly Jan and Shannon Major. They began by each one presenting a short biography to the assembled group to explain why and under what terms they considered themselves to be working class.

we acknowledged that people get funny about being middle class, like we're blaming them, or looking down on them, we spoke quite a lot about how NOT to make them feel undermined or demonized, as political feminists... we didn't want to be like "this IS what working class is and we feel that every one we know is middle class, and you are making us feel bad as working class people" - but then we discussed it more, and figured... we have to just be open and honest -- the truth is always going to be confronting, and challenging... and we shouldn't sacrifice our genuine concrete feelings and concerns for the potential political upset in others... if that makes sense? -

I think it did work because people reacted quite shocked like they'd never really seen anything like that before.. I think it's because we also spoke really colloquially and avoided being too politically spoken.. we wanted it to be "grass roots" ABOUT grass roots issues.. about personal experiences, no pretense, no political context.. just facts feelings and experiences. I think it was refreshing in a movement that can seem far too politically internalised (?!) (Jan 2011)

Importantly, the project started from a personal sense of "feeling bad as working class people". Feeling bad and silenced as working class people was the result of essentialist assumptions, identities unseen and unheard by a community of people who are expected to be supportive. The solution was to take the authority of the workshop to publicly explain "facts, feelings and experiences". Carly and Shannon staged/performed their identity in a way that explicitly chose to both build bridges with other feminists and not relinquish control of their narrative. They took control of their own definitions of identity, and didn't rely on certifying it either through outside experts or in a dialogical process of questions and answers with others. The audience, though they were different, were not treated as hostile, but comrades in a common cause of ending patriarchy. They used their cultural power as teachers/facilitators to create both safety and a sense of authority that facilitated actively processing the reality of class and cultural difference.

### **Theory and methodology of performing class**

It seems ironic to want to use more critical theory to support an argument that people who are involved in social justice work are not understanding each other. I am buying into a culture of discourse where the thoughts of an individual need to be justified by weaving webs of support with canonical knowledge. I am attempting to line up a group of very smart people behind me to justify something simple that I want to say: choosing how you want to define yourself and saying this in public will help create healthier radical communities. Yet I feel that this is a reclaiming of feminist and queer theory for the needs of feminist praxis, not for the needs of institutionalised knowledge machines.

If I were to read all of Judith Butler's books, what I would find at the end is a theoretical model that would support the real time process of diverse groups seeing each other. It is in this seeing and understanding of deeply complex identities that humans can work together to create radically non hierarchical egalitarian societies and movements.

When conflict arises it is tempting in a group of mixed genders and classes to create artificial divides between the men and the women, working class, middle class, and upper class: to look at others' identities as fixed and take sides accordingly. Queer theory suggests that gender is not fixed but comes into being by being "performed"; on this theoretical structure groups can see that taking sides in this way is an artificial and essentialist move. Judith Butler says that she tries to think of

performativity as *that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names*. Then I take a further step...and suggest that this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. (Osborne et al.1994)

In "Performing Working-Class Identity in Composition: Toward a Pedagogy of Textual Practice" Donna LeCourt references Butler in her argument that class is performative:

there is "no gender identity behind the expressions of gender," then discourse becomes central to understanding not only gender's socially constructed nature but also how "that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 25). What I am suggesting is that class identity works similarly. (2006, 39)

It is possibly a contentious point particularly among Marxists that class is a cultural construct, and that it is through recitations and repetitions in discourse that what is being performed actually comes into existence. There are some words in our vocabulary for people who operate in the class queer world: class traitors, trustafarians, downwardly mobile, up their own arse. People who transgress the normative of their inherited social role are just as much up for derision as those who transgress gender roles. This is not meant to undermine struggle against capitalism, rather to suggest that it is not necessarily the historically defined working class that is key agent in social transformation. Through queer theory we can see patriarchy and capitalism as systems that we can all work together to dismantle. Individual identity is mobile, complicated and being continuously revised but media, governments and corporations methodically create, disseminate and enforce sexist, racist, and classist cultures of homogeneity and closure.

### **Class as a bridge to think about performing other invisible identities**

Carly and Shannon performed their identities in order to foreground class assumptions that alienate people and that are regularly erased. Understanding the performative nature of class may help open a discussion around other

unseen identities that are not being performed within our communities. These may be narratives of religion, culture, migration/nationality, disability, loss, disease, abuse, and violence that people choose not to stage or perform.

Why aren't these narratives performed and what is the effect on the social movement, community and on the individual? Chally Kacelnik, feminist writer and blogger, explains it well when she speaks about the issue of passing as an abled person when her disability is not easily visible. She offers a first hand narrative of the issue of "reading" people who don't fit into boxes i.e. those that are not openly performing identity:

I realised it wasn't so important that I figure out someone's identity if I was just having a chat with them in a line or some such. If I don't need to know, I don't need to know. Someone else's comfort is more important than the satisfaction of my curiosity. This is particularly true for the people who don't fit into boxes so neatly, or for those who wish to keep their identity under wraps. For instance, I myself am regularly nervous about being outed by careless friends about my disability status, because I often can't afford to lose the credibility and respect passing as abled gives me. (2009)

Kacelnik illuminates some critical issues: the social desire to read people and place them in boxes; the reality that one can resist this desire; and that the performance of identity for those who don't fit into boxes is an active choice whose decision needs to remain with the individual.

This leads to a possibility of looking at the performance of difference within the historical problematic of "passing". While the practice of people performing alternative identities is ancient, the discourse of racial passing emerged in literature during the Harlem Renaissance examining the politics and poetics of light-skinned African-Americans "passing" as white (Larsen). The discourse of passing is also part of the disabilities rights movement as noted above by Kacelnik. Writing from the perspective of transsexual women's reality Andrea James explains the problematic:

Passing implies a binary of pass or fail. It also implies a deception, as if you're passing yourself off for something you are not. Thinking of ourselves this way is very unhealthy. We are female. We are transsexual women (2011)

Taken together we can see that the core issues may be that of agency and the right of the individual to decide how and when they want to define themselves.

There is however, another key issue within our movements is that there is no structured, unemotive, no nonsense context that is "safe" and "authoritative" to perform unseen identities.<sup>2</sup> These may be narratives of class, religion, culture, migration/nationality, disability, loss, disease, abuse, and violence that critically shape people's reality but that are not easily read.

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<sup>2</sup> During a general assembly at the Occupy London Stock Exchange I witnessed a white activist stand at the microphone and talk about the group becoming more diverse and reaching out, when I looked around me and saw old and young, rich and poor, immigrants, biracial people, Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, orphans.

What happens when there is no opportunity to perform an authentic narrative of the self? Leigh Goodmark in her article "When Is A Battered Woman Not A Battered Woman? When She Fights Back" examines how the institutions that have been created by the battered women's movement promote victim narratives. People who fall outside of the victim narrative are either advised to adapt their story or are rejected by the movement. Importantly this is more often than not lesbians and heterosexual black women who are most likely to fight back, because they lack other recourse.

In this context Goodmark is able to map the effect of not performing an authentic narrative has on women who fight back. She explains how from earliest childhood stories are used to order the world around us and that particularly for victims of domestic violence, the voicing of the personal narrative enables a the storyteller to hold on to her sense of self. "If the battered woman is denied her ability to tell her story, 'self' can never be realized." (2007, 5-6).

The narrative additionally forms a framework for communal relationships: "We establish relationships based on the stories we tell about ourselves, our history, our likes and dislikes, goals and aspirations. Bonds develop when the stories we share resonate with others." She illuminates the consequence of this lack of performance has on a community. She refers to Robert Cole's work and his belief that "Narratives can be instrumental, as well - offered for their ability to show others what we need and how they can help us." (Cole 1989, 20-21)

In this light we might see the inability to stage invisible narratives not so much as a choice but as an enforced silence in an environment that doesn't include structures and processes where all participants can easily and comfortably perform difference. When narratives of difference are not performed authentic solidarity and mutual aid can't exist because "need" as well as "resources" are erased.

### **When it doesn't happen: Zuck Off**

The DIY Feminist Festival had many ups and downs. Sessions were filled with a complex mixture of second wave feminists, students and academics with a solid grounding in queer theory, old punk rockers, young communists, anarchists, and more. The Zuck Off workshop was convened in order to discuss the protests of Ken Zucker. Ken Zucker is deeply disliked by many people for his work with "Gender Identity Disorder" and his belief in diagnosing children who are displaying "'gender incongruence' such as rejecting toys or clothes considered to be associated with their gender (e.g. a girl's rejection of feminine clothes)" (BPS Psychology of Women Section 2011, 14)

As the workshop started the person who convened it did not choose to actively address personal identities in any way. It soon became apparent that among workshop participants there was not a collective understanding about the difference between sex and gender, that "sex" refers to biological and

anatomical structures that a person is born with, while gender is something that is socially constructed.

The difference in knowledge and language that was not actively addressed resulted in confrontations between group members. The discussion became quite heated and eventually one participant challenged another to state how they read their gender. When the first person misread the gender of the person that challenged her, she was chastised.

Both of the people were feminists, one did not have any exposure at all to queer theory. The loose framework of the workshop resulted in them being placed in oppositional positions, rather than in horizontal positions challenging the greater forces of patriarchy and hetero normativity.

The structures implemented in class and feminism could have established a different method of educating each other and moving forward.

What would have happened if the workshop facilitator performed her own gender identity, explained the terms and processes that she used and then invited others to let the group know what pronoun that would like to be addressed with? Facilitation tools that actively include moments and times to define terms in an accessible way can be important for creating safe and inclusive spaces. A good facilitator will use a "go around" where everybody has a chance to speak, but at the moment is there a commonly used model where there is a quick and concise way to explain important terms in a colloquial fashion?

In mixed groups do we help give people skills on how not to be sexist in an up front and non confrontational manner? Is there a hand signal for stop patronizing me? Is there a way to stage identities that is inclusive, or do we need to create structures where people can teach themselves how to talk to people from different cultures, classes, and backgrounds?

There is no one size fits all solution; rather we need a context specific implementation of the "performing identity" strategy.

### **The problem with the old models**

Raj Patel and Kala Subbuswamy, eloquently writing in *Restructuring Resistance*, are able to quite clearly explain how anarchist principles can be problematic:

The principles of decentralisation and autonomy adopted by many within radical movements can also, unintentionally and remedially, be exclusionary. Many radical groups have anarchist principles behind them - non-hierarchical, consensus decision-making, often no formal structure. One problem with this is that it is often used to dismiss talk of what "the movement" can do about issues of race and gender, on the grounds that we're not a movement, we're a collection of individuals and so we can't make decisions about the "movement". (2001)

The suggestion that non-hierarchical consensus decision making creates an environment that enables racism and sexism (classism and able-ism) to continue to exist is an uncomfortable yet vital assertion. How it happens may be a replication of how essentialist notions of women emerged within feminism.

In the desire to create a method of resisting oppressive structures in education, government and leadership, horizontal models created a notion of direct democracy which made everyone equal but erased differences. It could be that these models were appropriated from contexts where there was a greater homogeneity along class and race such as the Zapatista Movement, or a common spiritual unity such as the Quakers and not enough thought has been put into equalizing privilege in post colonial European contexts.

These processes are being used on the ground in grassroots in social movements but offer no clear methodology to deal with gender, class, or race privilege. Radical education and organizational forms need some sort of road map and process for dismantling privilege in our communities.

Can staging difference in the places where we gather be a critical strategy in dismantling the privilege that we have inherited from colonialism? Will radically democratic forms be more effective when we acknowledge that there is still inequality between those that are participating in them?

### **Feminist strategies**

I know "embrace the post modern" is not the best rallying call for a movement. but it is post modern theories that deconstruct binary differences that can help us form a framework where it is logical for a "feminist" to work with white working class men who don't have a background in feminist understanding while confronting white middle class women with outdated ideas of feminist essentialism.

I started by saying that there were differences in languages that we speak. Our box-like identities are built with these languages (through the notion of performativity) and we all too often use them to recreate social hierarchies that are based on outdated ideas of "essentialist" identities; we use them to decide who is friend and who is foe.

I can see Marcel Marceau performing his stuck in a box routine and wonder if the notion of performing identities in our spaces in a conscious way may help us see the boxes that we have built, and once they are seen they can be dismantled, stepped out of or simply leaned against.

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