# Folding in Performativity: The Utilisation of Western Gendered Theory for Māori Gendered Reality

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**Abstract**

Judith Butler's influential work on gender performativity has been praised for cutting to the heart of the formation and deployment of gender in the modern world, but its academic popularity has been accompanied by critiques on its applicability to discourses of race and Indigenous perspectives. The article proposes a Māori theory of gender that draws on local contexts and challenges some of Butler's more universalist, Western notions, not necessarily discounting performativity, but treading around its more Eurocentric elements. While performativity offers valuable insights into the function and purpose of gender, it must evolve beyond theoretical abstraction to address material and ontological realities, especially concerning Indigenous communities' experiences with colonialism. This article advocates for Indigenous-led gender theories that take performativity further, to embrace community-aligned research that focuses on the impact, practice and politics of gender in New Zealand.

**Keywords:** performativity ontological discussion; racialisation; Indigenous gender; Māori philosophies

## Introduction

By interrogating the philosophical basis of performativity, the theorists Butler draws on to inform the context of performativity, and how the theory works alongside ideas of race, this article attempts to thread a theoretical needle. It embraces the fluidity offered by performativity and agrees with its general thesis that gender is constructed; however, it questions the reliance of gender theory on one idea. Few works engage with the theoretical aspects of performativity, likely because from the moment race and class is brought into discussion, it becomes clear that theory alone will not suffice. The philosophical and ontological discourses of Western gender are simply not materially pressing enough to justify activist engagement: Indigenous peoples are aware that our bodies are not our own, that the state can remove our agency at any moment, and Eurocentric ideas can be imposed onto even the most steadfast of traditions, such as the modern obsession with gender roles in pōwhiri (Irwin, 2019). Material interventions are a necessity in community-aligned research, but without following Barad's (2015) example and interrogating our ontological assumptions, we risk those interventions being channelled or blunted into short-term survival techniques under an oppressive system, rather than transformative anti-colonial projects (Coulthard, 2014). When research is led by Indigenous gender theorists (Luna-Pizano, 2023; Paora, 2023; Wilson, 2015), however, we routinely look past performativity to our own theories, frameworks and narrative constructions of gender.

## Theoretical background

Judith Butler's concept of performativity has been cemented at the centre of contemporary queer theory. Even when Butler (2024) has admitted to moving beyond performativity and only really thinking about it in terms of revision, those early texts on performativity "have changed the way scholars all over the world think, talk and write about identity, subjectivity, power and politics" (Barney, 2013, para 3). It is for this

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reason that this article centres performativity as the principal theory through which academics see and discuss gender, but injects it with a Māori framework to ensure such prominence can service all populations.

Since the imposition of colonial ideas of gender propriety, binaries and family structures onto Aotearoa in the 1800s (August, 2004; Hutchings & Aspin, 2007; Hoskins 2017; Mead 2016; Simmonds 2009),† a genealogy of staunch Māori have resisted what gender could, and should, look like. In 1985, Carmen Rupe was the first 'New Zealander' to have a passport marked without F or M, having instead a single '–' (Archives NZ, n.d., R24289738), and in 1995 Georgina Beyer was the first openly trans mayor to be elected in the world (Casey, 1999). These whakawāhine, trans- Māori and Pasifika femmes, "were community matriarchs" (Hansen, 2022) at the forefront of gay and queer liberation. They were critical to the culture, as the camp language of the mid-twentieth century queer New Zealand scene was a mix of "prison slang, pig Latin, Polari, gay slang, [te reo] Māori and localised dialect" (Ings, as cited in Hansen, 2022, para. 15). It was on Māori land, under Indigenous manaakitanga, that generations of queer people created a sense of home where they may not have experienced one prior. Snippets of mātauranga Māori were passed on through generations, and these 'matriarchs' were often raised in and around rural te ao Māori (Casey, 1999; Townsend, 2018), moving into cities and forging communities that could create the same sense of being and belonging that Māori know as tangata whenua.

By taking a broader approach that looks to the lived philosophies of gender arising from Indigenous and racialised peoples existing within and without their cultures, we can create more opportunities for theorists of gender to apply performativity in a way that resonates with communities, rather than at a discursive, abstract distance.

## Race, gender and performance

The ideas of race, ethnicity and nationality are fraught with tension in the social sciences, but it is most often agreed that they are all constructed rather than predetermined concepts, much like performativity. Here is a brief summary of what this article sees as the key points and distinctions between the three ideas. *Race* is a series of biological and genetic markers which are imbued with meaning to then form the 'idea of race', which is then often applied for eugenics, White supremacy, and inadequate social organisation that reinforces certain notions of political alignment and status (Akerovd, 1994; Anthias et al., 2005; Gillon et al., 2019). *Ethnicity*, meanwhile, is the lived experience of those assumptions of race. Ethnicity is functional but often contested and intimately bound to political needs and historic inaccuracies (Allen, 1994). While ethnic identity is often given validity through perceived race, the two can exist without one another (Gillon et al., 2019). *Nationality* is typically considered to be purely political, typically associated with citizenship and used for organisation rather than any personal identifier (Joseph, 1929/2021; Hertz, 2022).

Butler (1999) has admitted, often in preface or interviews rather than in the core of their works, the significance of how race engages with performativity for highlighting and challenging the "limits of gender as an exclusive category of analysis" (Butler, 1999, p. xvii). Race seems to be the natural direction of performativity, perhaps as the two both deal with the visual and assumptions of identity, over the more cultural ethnicity and political nationality. Despite the clear intersection of Butler's work and theories of race/ism, their work is littered with statements that ignore race and ethnicity entirely, such as: "Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender" (Butler, 1999, p. 12). The original text of *Gender Trouble* does not refer to race in any significant way, demoting the sole critical racial scholar used—Frantz Fanon—to the notes. Though the edited edition does recognise in the preface that "racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on gender in ways that need to be made explicit" (Butler, 1999, p. xvi), and Butler's later works seek to engage with decoloniality, it is clear that their content

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1 Aotearoa is used in this instance to refer to the proper name of the country pre-colonisation, while New Zealand has been used at all other times as the article deals with issues of colonial import. It is not tika to use the two interchangeably, as they do not refer to the same nation.

may have changed but their habits have not. In *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, Butler (2020, p. 76) again begins their analysis from "psychoanalysis with both moral philosophy and social theory", rather than environmental or material analysis. It is not difficult to read this work alongside Tuck and Yang's (2012) *Decolonisation is not a Metaphor* and see a clear issue with the approach Butler takes. The prevalence of White, urban and wealthy scholars is particularly of note in Chapter 3 of *The Force of Nonviolence*, when discussing the ethics and politics of nonviolence. Foregrounded are Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Étienne Balibar and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The engagement with non-White perspectives on violence is placed squarely on Franz Fanon, with a mention of Achille Mbembe's development of Foucault's biopolitics but little else, and nothing of note from the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island.

Despite the clear direction of gender to race in Butler's work, Ewara (2020, p. 266) has pointed out that there is a "general silence surrounding Butler's theorizing about race" and rarely does academic work consider how both gender and race are performed simultaneously, outside of foundational texts by authors such Mahmood (2012), Strings (2019), Harrison (2021) and Moreton-Robinson (2020). When race and gender are understood in tandem, it is often from a Western perspective, which does not challenge the ideas at the basis of performance, such as self, other and human. However, by choosing to engage with racial, gendered performativity as more than a translation of one to the other, but actually rewriting the ontological and epistemic assumptions being made, and thinkers being privileged, we see a new form of performativity and agency occur.

## Indigenous selfhood

Inhabitants of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa largely see all people as being born into a web of relations that extend past space and time within multiple realities that create the individual (Nokise, 2017). So, as Burgess (2023, para. 3, emphasis in original) lays bare, "This is the very nature of our existence as Māori. To *be* is to *be in relation*." This idea is reinforced by Hoskins's (2017, p. 4) speculation that "We come into being not as autonomous entities but always already as relations." Wilson (2015) applies this to the queer experience by arguing that 'coming out' is not the appropriate term for queer Indigeneity, we rather 'come in' to our communities for whatever purpose our full selfhoods lead us to. Once a union of parents occurs, the self is already defined among relations and propriety, so the common trans- experience of self-creation is more of a repositioning than a fundamental change in character. This Māori selfhood emphasises that the subject exists prior to any sort of specific existence. Our pathways have been set for us by ancestors who have died, and those who have not yet lived—the self is entirely social. While such an approach to selfhood appears restrictive, this is not to say that individual agency is entirely extinguished and "the idea that 'traditional' societies are more socio-centric and are without a notion of the individual, bounded, autonomous self has been criticized in anthropology" (Moore, 2007, p. 27). Māori do have a strong concept of selfhood, but also recognise that care for others comes through the self (Kohu-Morgan, 2019), and when selfhood has been denied from you, reclaiming the self as Māori is central to community, and thus, personal fulfilment and well-being (Green & Pihama, 2023). Part of this reclamation of the self for the determination of the whole is intimately grounded in re/understanding Māori ontologies, rather than just reiterating Western ways of being.

Ideas of a Māori self emerge from Māori cosmology—back to the time of gods and creation as an assertion of validity and legitimacy of a specific time of identity grounded in the stages of self-conceptualisation (Green & Pihama, 2023; Mika, 2015). Nikora et al. (2017) apply these cosmological considerations through a whakapapa of Māori creation. Te Kore gave way to Te Pō, which folded into Te Ao Mārama, and then expanded into Te Ao Tūroa. Each of these states can be associated with a figure, as well as a type of self-conceptualisation. For Te Kore, Hereaka (2021) applies the figure of Kurangaituku, the bird-woman of Te Arawa legend. She created herself from within the possibilities of Te Kore, but she

was not recognised as a self until the birds that came from the same nothingness perceived her, and "my identity was defined in relationship to the other – the birds became my negative space" (Hereaka, 2021, p. 22). The selfhood within Te Kore is thus potential, the ability to become. Te Pō can be attributed to the conception of Papatūānuku, where 'nothingness' breeds 'something', an agent which begins to shift the space around them (Grace, 2019). The selfhood within Te Pō is thus origins, the beginning of a state of existence and tapu. Te Ao Mārama is characterised by the separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku, and the exploits of Tāne-Māhuta. This is by translation the Māori Enlightenment and the beginning of our world, where Tāne set to gather the three baskets of knowledge that connect the abstract and concrete, cognitive and speculative realms of existence (Marsden, 1975; Lilley, 2018), and craft the first human, Hineahuone, from the period blood and labia of Papatūānuku (Ihimaera, 2020). Te Ao Mārama's selfhood comes from communion and dialogue. Finally, Te Ao Tūroa can be attributed to Hinetītama, the daughter of Tāne and Hineahuone who bore the next children of Tāne (Mead, 2016). Upon learning of her father's betrayal and incest, Hinetītama rejected the form Tāne placed upon her and became Hinenui-te-pō, choosing to guard their children in death rather than in Te Ao Tūroa with him (Hereaka, 2021). In this, she achieved the selfhood characterised by Te Ao Tūroa—self-realisation, taking agency over one's life while still fulfilling obligation to others. Through these figures, it is possible to see that Māori do have a complex idea of selfhood characterised by the stages of potential, origin, communion and, finally, realisation.

While there are clearly intersections with performativity in this cosmological timeline of selfhood—particularly in the idea that the self is predominantly created in light of others—gender in this sense is more accountable to forces that humans have no control over. Selfhood involves the active balance of the self-as-inheritor (of status and mana), the self-as-celestial (with the essence and input of gods and spirits), the self-as-necessary (based on physical abilities and context), and the self-as-known (built over time based on personal experiences and development). In the modern New Zealand context, and especially within Māori spaces, it is clear to see that these two philosophies of what it means to be the self are at odds. To borrow framing from Amin (2022), this contrast between autological and genealogical selfhood was made apparent in a New Zealand context by Awatere (1984), when writing that there is an inherent divide between Māori and Pākehā in ways of being and politics, and that centres around the prioritisation of the self versus the other. These philosophical differences spill over into performativity, where the priorities and takeaways of the theory can be easily misaligned, leading to the privileging of Butler's discursive emphasis.

## The politics of the self

Self-determination in the Māori sense is intimately linked to identity as tangata whenua. Ormond and Ormond's (2018) conceptualisation of homeland stresses that collective conscience, ritual and shared narrative enrich tikanga and cement the importance of land and community for self-determination. Without the ability to protect and develop land and tikanga, Māori will cease to exist, as written in the whakataukī "Whatungarongaro te tangata toitū te whenua" ("As the people vanish, the land endures"). Self-determination is thus a political action, rebellion against the extinctionist and assimilatory politics that seek to repress Māori identity. How this Māori identity is shaped in relation to this oppression can be harmful, co-opted or assimilatory (Pihama, 2021; Simmonds, 2011; Smith, 2012), but the identity must be agreed upon and acted out by the people in order to be considered self-determined. It is not about any one individual being able to claim a label; rather, the survival of a people and their land (Awatere, 1984). The idea of a self is only important so far as it advances your people, as a whole, and many Indigenous theories, including Kaupapa Māori, must be materially applicable to the communities they seek knowledge from in order to be considered legitimate (Simmonds, 2011; Smith, 2012; Tocker, 2015).

Performativity's emphasis on abstract theorising aligns well to the more discursive Western idea of selfhood which privileges a disconnected individual, but for a more genealogical and relational selfhood,

theory does not translate well. Theorists from within these more relational communities often point out the harsh truth that while historical, philosophical and ontological debates *can* be useful, they rarely provide any tangible, practical intervention (Gamble et al., 2019; Zalewski, 1996). A Māori selfhood, and thus a Māori approach to performativity, must consider the material impacts and effects of gender as its primary origin point. It must not only consider Te Ao Mārama, communion and discourse, but also Te Pō and Te Ao Tūroa, the conditions existing prior to us, and those we exist within.

Some of the more influential works in gender that critique performativity and stress the relational rather than individual process of gender emphasise that the material is not simply the end result of performativity, but an active participant in it, as people embody the philosophies that inform abstract ideas of self and being. Barad's work (2003, 2015), in particular, pushes this further. Rather than zoning in on linguistic-discursive approaches or psychoanalysis, Barad looks at the ontological assumptions that underpin how bodies and selfhood function through their background in theoretical particle physics. This new way of approaching gender, while not directly related to racial contexts, has provided a revitalisation of performativity as a theory concerning a series of intersecting events and entanglements, where knowing, being and material are inseparable from one another (Barad, 2007). If we follow Barad, and apply a new philosophical framework to performativity, there is a somewhat clear path to a theory of Māori gender that admits the material reality of gender performance, the uniquely social and relational importance of gender to Māori and other Pasifika peoples, and the pre-human, unknowable aspects of our world.

The discursive emphasis of performativity is theoretically exciting and rebellious, allowing anyone to break off from social norms and chart their own path, but it rarely crosses into material action. Halberstam (2005, 2018) concedes that while trans- bodies are contradictory, they are not, by virtue of their existence, non-normative or politically challenging. While queer actors can disidentify with normative gender structures by blurring them to externally produce visibility (Eleftheriadis, 2018), Bordo (2003, p. 294) stresses that:

> …subversion is contextual, historical, and above all, social. No matter how exciting the destabilizing potential of texts, bodily or otherwise, whether those texts are subversive or recuperative or both or neither cannot be determined in abstraction from actual social practice.

## Conclusion

Performativity is a theory rife with destabilising potential. It offers, at its most optimistic, a way to cut through the reiteration of gender and explore an agency that exists outside of the current options. Butler's work has been rightly heralded as landmark, bringing Foucault's ideas of power to gender relations and refining it across the 30 years of work they have produced. Such a pedestal has, however, resulted in issues of transference. Racialisation in performativity is overwhelmingly an effort of translation, often looking at how race is performed, or how gender is impacted by race. Rarely does literature look at how the performance of race and gender coexist, or how our approach to one can be tweaked by considering our approach to the other. By investigating how performativity derives from Western notions of selfhood, we can mirror that trajectory and consider Māori selfhood. From there, a Māori theory of gender that draws on the useful parts of performativity, and dismisses universalising Western notions, can be created. This framework draws from local contexts, structural and material analysis, and linguistic-discursive experiences to consider how, on both a microsocial and macrosocial level, gender is embodied, reiterated and used by both individuals and collectives. Textuality, existence, embodiment and the litany of individualised theoretical terms used when referencing performativity are useful up until the point of social change, when theory needs to step aside, and an experience-driven, contextually informed theory of performativity comes to the fore.

## Glossary

| Kupu Māori | Brief English translation |
|---|---|
| hīkoi | directed march/protest walk |
| mana | authority, power bestowed upon an individual |
| manaakitanga | extended warmth |
| mātauranga | combined knowledge |
| pōwhiri | process of clearing the way upon first meeting |
| tangata whenua | people of the land |
| tapu | state of spiritual restriction from divine realm |
| te ao Māori | the normal world, non-divine, Indigenous centred |
| te kore | a state of potential nothingness |
| te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa | reclamation of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia |
| te ao mārama | the first light |
| te pō | the long night of something |
| te ao tūroa | the long day |
| tikanga | proper way of acting |
| wero | challenge |
| whakapapa | three-dimensional genealogy |
| whakataukī | ancestral wisdom |
| whakawāhine | those who move into femininity |

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