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DRAG AS RESISTANCE: GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND THE SUBVERSION OF HETERONORMATIVITY IN *HURRICANE BIANCA* (2016)

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi isu performativitas gender dalam *Hurricane Bianca* (2016) serta bagaimana drag dapat dipandang sebagai bentuk perlawanan terhadap heteronormativitas institusional. Berdasarkan konsep performativitas, sitasionalitas (citationality), dan iritabilitas (iterability) yang dikemukakan oleh Judith Butler, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui analisis tekstual dan visual terhadap empat adegan, yaitu: pernyataan Karma Johnstone bahwa gender merupakan konstruksi sosial, penggunaan bahasa yang bersifat eksklusif oleh kepala sekolah terhadap Richard Martinez, adegan transformasi Bianca yang ditampilkan melalui extreme close-up riasan mata, serta momen ketika Bianca memperkenalkan dirinya di hadapan dewan sekolah dengan mengatakan, "This is Bianca." Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa identitas gender Bianca Del Rio bukanlah sesuatu yang esensial maupun permanen. Sebaliknya, identitas tersebut dibentuk melalui serangkaian tindakan seperti berdandan, berbicara, menggunakan gestur tertentu, dan menamai dirinya sendiri. Perlawanan terhadap heteronormativitas institusional tidak dilakukan melalui konfrontasi langsung, melainkan melalui pengulangan tindakan, profesionalisme, dan visibilitas. Strategi tersebut memungkinkan Bianca untuk mendefinisikan kembali posisinya dalam struktur organisasi sekolah dengan mengganggu norma-norma yang telah mapan. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini membuktikan bahwa *Hurricane Bianca* merepresentasikan drag sebagai bentuk perlawanan politik yang menyoroti rapuhnya praktik-praktik heteronormatif.

Kata kunci: Performativitas Gender, Judith Butler, *Hurricane Bianca*, Teori Queer, Heteronormativitas

Abstract

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi isu performativitas gender dalam *Hurricane Bianca* (2016) serta bagaimana drag dapat dipandang sebagai bentuk perlawanan terhadap heteronormativitas institusional. Berdasarkan konsep performativitas, sitasionalitas (citationality), dan iterabilitas (iterability) yang dikemukakan oleh Judith Butler, penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui analisis tekstual dan visual terhadap empat adegan, yaitu: pernyataan Karma Johnstone bahwa gender merupakan konstruksi sosial; penggunaan bahasa yang eksklusif oleh kepala sekolah terhadap Richard Martinez; adegan transformasi Bianca yang ditampilkan melalui *extreme close-up* pada riasan mata; serta adegan ketika Bianca memperkenalkan identitas barunya di hadapan dewan sekolah dengan mengatakan, “*This is Bianca.*” Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa identitas gender Bianca Del Rio tidak bersifat esensial maupun permanen. Sebaliknya, identitas tersebut dibentuk melalui serangkaian tindakan seperti berdandan, berbicara, menggunakan gestur tertentu, dan menamai dirinya sendiri. Perlawanan terhadap heteronormativitas institusi tidak dilakukan melalui konfrontasi langsung, melainkan melalui pengulangan tindakan, profesionalisme, dan visibilitas. Strategi ini memungkinkan Bianca mendefinisikan kembali posisinya dalam struktur organisasi sekolah dengan mengganggu norma-norma yang telah mapan. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini membuktikan bahwa *Hurricane Bianca* merepresentasikan drag sebagai bentuk perlawanan politik yang menyoroti rapuhnya praktik-praktik heteronormatif.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Hurricane Bianca, Queer Theory, Heteronormativity

1. Introduction

Society continues to discriminate against those who fail to meet the social norm in terms of gender and sexual orientation. LGBT discrimination can be seen to have a connection to socially constructed gender norms and happens when the individual fails to live up to the expectations of either being male or female (Lau, 2018). Therefore, one can see that gender is more of a socially controlled term rather than biological.

Film is one of the mediums of reinforcing the conventions as well as questioning them. As a cultural product, the film is not just a reflection of the social norm but also constructs societal views on what is normal and abnormal in terms of identity and difference through stories and images (Zhu, 2024). Heteronormativity as a convention involves the expectation that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation, not only in terms of sexuality but also in terms of clothing and other behaviors. Those who defy the heteronormative convention end up being punished or ostracized, which is shown in the film called *Against the Law* (2017).

A good example of these concepts is provided by the movie *Hurricane Bianca* (2016), an American satirical comedy film. In the movie, Richard Martinez, a homosexual science teacher, loses his job at a conservative Texas school after his sexual preference is known to everyone. Richard eventually comes back to fight against the school as Bianca Del Rio, his drag queen identity. Using humor and satire, the film criticizes the norms of heterosexuality, homophobia and institutional oppression towards the LGBTQ community.

Viewed using the perspectives of Queer theory, the film shows that Butler (1990) was right when arguing that gender identity was not innate or prior to the existence of people. Bianca becomes a good example of Butler's (1990) point in stating that gender is what one performs but not something one is since it is performed through certain repetitive behaviors including dressing, speaking and other gestures.

While the film *Hurricane Bianca* touches on contemporary discussions in the sphere of gender and queer theories, it still remains under-studied from an academic perspective. Current scholarly works in terms of drag performance concentrate exclusively on theatrical drag; hence, the problem of cinematic drag remains understudied (Kotliuk, Dougherty, & McCormack, 2023). Moreover, while there are scholarly works discussing drag and queerness, they do not discuss how comedy can be used to challenge the heteronormative system since *Hurricane Bianca* uses the genre to do so explicitly. In geographical terms, there is a work which discusses drag and heteronormativity in Russia (Zhonga, 2022); however, there is no work which discusses the problem of drag and queerness in American cinema.

It fills in this gap by focusing on how *Hurricane Bianca* performs gender in a socially constructed reality rather than in an essential sense. Of specific interest here is how Bianca's identity is constructed through interaction and performance, how other characters react to her, and how she subverts institutional power in a conservative environment. The following are the research questions for the current study:

1. How does Bianca Del Rio's drag appearance construct gender performativity in *Hurricane Bianca* (2016)?
2. In what ways does Bianca Del Rio subvert heteronormativity through its narrative construction of drag as a site of resistance and identity destabilization?

2. Literature Review

In the current analysis, the theories of queer studies and the theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler will be used. It is worth saying that according to Butler (1990), gender and sexuality should not be understood as natural and static categories but as social constructs. Bodies that display themselves in different ways from the norms established by society can become a “constitutive outside” that may endanger the materialization of the norms (Martinsson, Lilja, & Johansson, 2018, p. 136). In this context, the notion of heteronormativity should be mentioned since it implies that heterosexuality is considered to be the only possible orientation along with specific norms concerning clothes, speech, and behavior in accordance with gender.

Gender performativity theory of Butler sees gender as not biological or natural but a continuous process which depends on repetition. The dressing style of a person, his/her speech, behavior and movements come together to form a pattern, which may seem “natural” due to their being repeated according to social conventions. Gender identity which seems to be a stable phenomenon according to Butler is nothing but an illusion brought about by repetition rather than any natural thing. And since it is artificial in nature, it remains fluid in essence; change in repetition changes the gender too.

First stated in the books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, performativity theory breaks down the traditional dichotomy between gender and sexuality, showing both to be products of performative repetition (Kakoliris, 2025; Li, 2017). Perhaps one of the key yet least understood propositions of this theory is that there is no “actor” behind “action.” In other words, gender does not come from an already existing identity; gendered acts produce a sense of coherence in the self. Thus, gender cannot be the cause of gendered actions but rather their consequence; performativity can be seen as world-making in which actions do not disclose a preexisting truth but create it.

Since gender is constructed through performance rather than being something natural, it is by nature unstable and always at risk of disruption. Because gender norms rely on constant acts of citation and re-citation, any act of performance, including an act of parody or distortion, such as drag performance, can destabilize the system and reveal the artificial nature of the construction of gender norms. In this sense, drag shows us how gender norms have always relied on performance all along. Any interruption or distortion of citation requires the normative system to constantly strive to maintain the illusion of stability. The analysis of Bianca Del Rio’s performance in “Hurricane Bianca” relies on the use of gender as citation and disruption.

3. Research Method

In this study, the methodology that is adopted is qualitative film analysis, which involves interpreting the meaning, representation, and social relations generated in a text and not quantifying them. Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity will be analyzed in the context of *Hurricane Bianca* (2016), an 84-minute satirical comedy from America, directed by Matt Kugelman, and starring Roy Haylock as Richard Martinez / Bianca Del Rio. The movie was watched several times in its entirety with the aim of detecting scenes where through dialogue, camera shots, and interaction between characters identity formation, gender

performances, and social tension, especially with regards to Richard's transition to Bianca, take place.

Data analysis involved textual and visual analysis. In terms of textual analysis, the focus was on dialogues and characters' interactions in order to uncover the assumptions about gender in the story. Visual analysis was focused on such elements of performance as costume, gesture, facial expressions, and cinematography used in the performance of gender on screen. Four scenes were singled out for the detailed analysis in relation to their connection to performativity, citationality, and iterability: Karma Johnstone's declaration that "gender is really just a social construct"; the exclusive discourse of the principal regarding Richard; the extreme close-up of Bianca getting her eye makeup done; and finally, Bianca publicly announcing who she is ("This is Bianca") to the school board. All these scenes were chosen due to the importance of a particular aspect of performativity highlighted by them.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Gender Performativity by Judith Butler

Throughout the film, gender identity proves to be both mutable and non-natural. According to Butler (1990), the process of naturalization is made possible by the act of continual repetition of gender roles in the course of daily existence. In the case of Richard dressing up, talking, and acting like Bianca, there is no unveiling of the inner femininity he possessed beforehand but the creation of a new one through repetitive actions. The contrast between the treatment Richard receives from one side and Bianca from the other in spite of their belonging to the same institution indicates that it is the repetition that defines the recognition.

It also illustrates that social identity depends on collective recognition rather than an inherent quality and that performativity may be employed as a form of resistance rather than conformity. The act of performance on the part of Bianca is not an affirmation of the very social order which initially marginalized her; instead, it is through her continuous act of self-performance that she ultimately gains recognition for her presence. It corroborates Butler's assertion that norms need to be continuously reinforced in order to survive and, in addition, through repeated performance of another form, they can be undermined. Since Richard and Bianca have the same physical body, it illustrates that identity can be negotiated through performative acts, an analysis of which will follow in the next four scenes.

4.2. Scene-Based Analysis of Performativity and Resistance

4.2.1. Self-Consciousness: Karma's Discursive Catalyst

When Karma Johnstone tells Richard “that gender is really just a social construct,” it becomes a significant moment in the movie. In the light of the Butlerian theory of performativity, this claim of Karma becomes a discursive trigger, which enables Richard to realize that gender identity cannot be treated as something natural and stable (Butler, 1990; Kakoliris, 2025, p. 61). After the conversation with Karma, Richard decides to go back to school dressed up as Bianca Del Rio, which could be described as subversive repetition, because the border between masculine and feminine identities becomes blurry. According to Butler, subversive repetition could serve as an instrument for challenging gender norms.

4.2.2. Institutional Discipline: The Principal's Exclusionary Rhetoric

Another example is one of power working institutionally through language rather than through prohibition; in saying “your situation will be a distraction,” the principal effectively manages and exiles a queer body from the learning environment without having to directly name it. This further demonstrates the argument made by Butler that discourse functions to produce the normative values rather than reflect them through naming, categorizing, and excluding. Through the invocation of the values of the institution, the principal acts to re-enforce heteronormativity, which, in turn, is challenged by Bianca's performance (Rennhack, 2023, p. 21). What makes this particular scene important is the fact that the heteronormativity of power is constructed through constant institutional speech rather than being a natural truth.

4.2.3. Inscribing the Body: The Eye-Makeup Transformation

In another scene, the emphasis is laid upon the body as the place where the materiality of gender is constructed. Contrary to the portrayal of Richard's transition in one single event, the film constructs the process of inscribing his body with gender. As argued by Butler in *Gender Trouble*, gendered subject does not stand behind the expression of gender as its source but constitutes itself as gendered through the expression of gender (Butler, 1993; Kakoliris, 2025, p. 71). In the extreme close-up scene, Bianca's eyes become the place where the process of drawing the features of femininity takes place and then gets erased. The design of her eye makeup is dark,

dramatic, storm-like, serving as the visual introduction to her identity prior to any verbal articulation.

4.2.4. Fluidity and Public Reclamation: “This Is Bianca”

The last scene illustrates Bianca's performance of her identity when she tells the school board “This is Bianca.” The above scenario marks a performative naming of an identity that does not seek to define a character but asserts a queer identity in a space that has been defined by heterosexual norms. The ensuing reaction in form of hostility, discipline, and attempts to exclude mark a show of weakness of the hetero normative space, which requires active maintenance instead of stability as opposed to being fragile. The mismatch between the characters, costumes, and script is a demonstration of gender trouble, as illustrated by Butler, which challenges the hierarchies created by sex and gender binaries (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021).

The four scenes work together to illustrate the process of moving from catalyst of discourse to institutional discipline to inscription onto the body to public recuperation—how the film *Hurricane Bianca* employs drag not only for comedic effect, but as a Butlerian subversion of the heterosexual matrix.

5. Conclusion

The study analyzed the concept of gender performativity in the film *Hurricane Bianca* (2016), and the role of performativity in challenging heteronormativity using the theories of gender performativity, citationality, and iterability by Judith Butler.

Addressing the first research question, the gender identity of Bianca emerges not because of an act of transformation but the result of accumulative performativity. The statement, “gender is really just a social construct,” made by Karma works as the discursive catalyst for Bianca. Further, the eye makeup scene illustrates that femininity is marked onto the body of Bianca, unlike the revelation of one’s internal femininity.

Regarding the second research question, however, Bianca resists institutional heteronormativity mainly through repetition and prolonged visibility instead of verbally opposing authority. The regulatory speech of the principal in its polite tone excludes without being explicit about exclusion, suggesting that heteronormativity operates via readability rather than being an inherent truth about genders. Thus, when Bianca states in front of the school board “This is Bianca,” this cannot be seen as confrontation of authority because this is rather self-naming of Bianca – the subject that refuses to disappear from the gaze of institutional

order, which has already been deprived of her. It is this resistance to disappearance, rather than conflict with authority, which makes evident the vulnerability of institutional order based upon perpetual reaffirmation.

In summary, this research validates the theory of how Hurricane Bianca uses drag not just for humor, but rather as a form of resistance. Bianca's over-the-top display of femininity shows how gender itself is an impersonation of something that does not even exist. Her prolonged stay inside a heterosexual institution subverts the same norms that initially barred her from visibility.

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