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Performing Gender in Paleontology

Amy K. Guenther

Poised. Rugged. Serious. Intense. Smiling. Laughing. The faces looking back at you seek to upend the gendered stereotypes of paleontologists as venerable, bearded (white) men. The women pictured in *The Bearded Lady Project* portraits still wear the same clothes, body postures, demeanors, and hairstyles as they did before the camera crew walked into their research fields and labs. The only artifices actually visible are the carefully selected and trimmed beards, goatees, and mustaches applied moments before. Amused at being asked to perform gender in what, for most, is an unfamiliar, theatrical way, some smile, their faces stretched in new, exaggerated directions by the glue holding their artificial beards in place.

The Bearded Lady Project makes visible, through explicit gender play, the ways women must negotiate gender performativity in the sciences, specifically in the field of paleontology. Does a good paleontologist need a beard? No, of course not. But the placing of beards on women scientists is a cross-gender performance seeking to evoke a playful response to the real and sometimes very hazardous realities of performing gender in a field dominated by men.

What does it mean to perform gender? In 1988, philosopher Judith Butler began popularizing the concept of gender performativity. She explained that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through *a stylized repetition of acts*."¹ Through the repetition of acts, gender is not stable (for an individual or society), biological, or even binary, but multifaceted, malleable, and dialectic. Butler bridged a discussion of gender in phenomenology and feminist theory with the burgeoning field of performance studies.

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Performance scholar Diana Taylor defines the use of the word "performance" in performance studies as the event/object to be analyzed and the "methodological lens that enables [131] scholars to analyze events *as* performance."² This latter definition better encapsulates the ways in which gender is performative.

Performance, like gender, is always in a process of becoming. Performance scholar Elin Diamond describes it as "a doing and a thing done," wherein performance "describes certain embodied acts"—the doing—as well as the "completed event . . . remembered, misremembered, interpreted, and . . . revisited across a pre-existing discursive field"—the thing done.³ Similarly, Butler asserts "that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time."⁴ Both definitions grapple with how to define something that is always in a process of becoming before, during, and after an individual enters the stage. In the performance of gender, the repetition of gestures, costumes, behaviors, etc. crafts a framework of being and moving through the world into which an individual enters and exerts influence.

Today, when scholars and activists argue that gender is performed, they do not mean that changing one's gender identity is as easy as changing one's clothing, a mischaracterization often promoted by gender essentialists—people who believe gender is entirely dependent on biological sex. This intentionally obtuse understanding of gender performance informs most of the transphobic bathroom legislation in various U.S. states whereby, they assert, a man in a dress will be free to assault women and children. As gender theorists like Butler and the lived experiences of feminists and LGBTQIA+ communities can attest, in any given hegemony gender is often not consciously or intentionally performed until society judges one to be performing it incorrectly. Thus, the use of "performance" in discussions of gender is not frivolous,

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insignificant, or capricious. Performing gender incorrectly in a given time and place has very real and sometimes very dangerous consequences.

That said, performances as framed events in time and space, like *The Bearded Lady Project*, often call attention to, subvert, accentuate, and/or poke fun at the gender performativity in a given time and place. Placing beards on women's faces plays at cross-gendered casting, wherein the actor's gender does not match the character's. Here, the women scientists are cast as the stereotype of a scientist, a man whose beard signifies his maleness. Modern feminist and/or queer theatrical productions often use cross-gender casting to accentuate the character's gender role in the world of the play; to call attention to the perceptions of gender that the audience brings into the theatre; and to reflect on the contemporary moment's social construction of gender. This is explicitly different from when women were legally barred from performing on stage and men performed all of the roles during various times in Western history. Seeing a woman actor perform [132] a male role is an example of what playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht calls "alienation," whereby the audience is forced into critical aesthetic distance from the believability of the world of the play and does not fall into the passive trance evoked by realism.

The participants in *The Bearded Lady Project* photographic exhibit are not attempting to pass as men. They simply wear the clothes they were already wearing in the field or lab. The clothing choices for the outdoor field are largely gender neutral or leaning toward masculine out of practicality. They are meant to be breathable and easy to move in, so they are not tailored close to the body. Pants, long sleeves, and hats protect the body from sunburn, bugs, and the scrapes of rocks and brambles.

For many of the subjects, the choice of outdoor clothing also reflects an additional safety concern. Being perhaps the only woman camped at a particular site for days or weeks carries

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similar safety warnings as women receive when walking alone at night: do not draw attention to yourself. The clothing of the field often acts like camouflage, deflecting attention away from their status as women, alone.

The beards, carefully selected and attached off camera, blend into the overall aesthetic of the black-and-white photographs they parody. If you glance at the portraits quickly, as I have seen several observers do, you might assume they are the famous male paleontologists represented in the textbooks. But if you look carefully, you see these paleontologists are women, not men—not women trying to pass as men. You can see the artifice of the beards, the netting attaching the hair to the face, mimicking the subtle exposure of artifice that is at the heart of the entire project. The attachment of a beard to these field costumes both critiques the expectation that paleontologists are men and makes explicit in an exaggerated fashion the implicit gender bias in the sciences and the more subtle choices about clothing and behavior women paleontologists must make to survive conferences, classrooms, and academic departments.

The stories told in *The Bearded Lady Project* demonstrate that many of its subjects were forced into a more conscious gender performance than was necessary before becoming paleontologists. Women paleontologists face many of the same biases as women in other careers, but with a special emphasis on more masculine clothing and traits. Well-meaning but misguided mentors still advise women paleontologists to downplay any performances of femininity: tight-fitting clothes, skirts and dresses, bright lipstick, substantial make-up. This recommendation has several problems. It presumes that women are inherently drawn to femininity. It is also given under the guise of professionalism, wherein "professional" is a code word for more masculine. Like the clothing of the field, it implies safety concerns, i.e., [133] that women who dress a certain way are asking for harassment. Anecdotes abound of early career women paleontologists

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forgoing certain conferences and even changing their specializations to protect themselves from the advances of older, gatekeeping men. The implicit and sometimes explicit messages women paleontologists receive are to be more masculine and less explicitly feminine to earn more respect and, more insidiously, to protect themselves from sexual advances. This is not to say that all women paleontologists gravitate towards performing femininity, but that all paleontologists enter into a system that implicitly judges them for their adherence to a certain gender performance. Performing well in the sciences should not be tied to the perception of performing gender correctly. Yet the implicit message is to exaggerate the masculine over the feminine. Today, however, many women paleontologists are consciously performing high femme at conferences and in the classroom because they like makeup and fashion, find it empowering, and do not see this as mutually exclusive to also being a well-respected paleontologist. That several *Bearded Lady Project* subjects have described these performances as conscious decisions to emphasize their femininity and their status as women reflects larger movements in feminist and queer discourses that advocate for wearing [134] what makes the wearer feel good regardless of hegemonic gender roles. That is, expressing femininity through clothing does not mean that the more negative stereotypes of femininity—being passive, weak, or less intelligent—must accompany it. Moreover, many of the portraits taken in labs rather than the field feature subjects with more feminine-leaning signifiers in their clothing and hairstyles. This is not to say that good paleontologists should be more feminine. Instead, it complicates the notion that there is any one good way to perform paleontologist.

Paleontologists are adept at reconstructing ancient worlds from the fossilized bodies of plants and animals, but many are still learning to engage with how their own bodies create meaning within their disciplines. *The Bearded Lady Project* photographic exhibit includes a

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variety of bearded ladies, not just those parodying the nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographs of ye olde (bearded, male) paleontologists and in doing so, expands the definition of what performing gender in paleontology could mean.

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¹ Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no.4 (1988): 519; italics in original.

² Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 3; italics in original.

³ Diamond, Elin. "Introduction." *Performance and Cultural Politics*. Ed. Elin Diamond. London & New York: Routledge, 1996, 1.

⁴ Butler, "Performative Acts," 523.