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Conference Draft

**Biological Drag: The Performative Potential of Tears**

“Don’t cry, I told myself fiercely, stay in control.” Excerpt from the autobiography of Madeleine Kunin, first female Governor of Vermont[[1]](#footnote-1)

It seems cliché, as a woman, especially a feminist, to write about crying. Isn’t this something that I should avoid at all costs? Feminism is about challenging the patriarchy; fighting the dominant power structure; changing the world. Doesn’t crying accomplish exactly the opposite? Doesn’t crying demonstrate our weakness to the enemy? Feminists should write about power and freedom, not about weakness and fragility. Doesn’t crying represent just that, our innate fragility, our inherent sensitivity, our ingrained emotionality? And when I say ‘our’, I am obviously referring to women, because it is women who, lacking control over emotions, erupt into tears at the drop of a hat. I’m being facetious here, but it’s not so difficult to imagine this description of women crying. This is precisely the reason that a feminist *should* write about crying. It is not only women who cry, but it is curiously considered feminine to cry. Socrates berates his friends in the last lines of the *Phaedo* for crying over his death:

“Most of us, for a time, were able to hold back our tears fairly well, but when we saw him drinking, and then that the cup was drained, we could hold back no longer… Apollodorus, who hadn't stopped weeping even before this, now started bellowing and was in such patent distress that he caused every one of those present to break down, except of course for Socrates himself. His response was to say 'What display to make of yourselves! It was for just this reason, you realize, that I sent the women away, to stop them making a noise like this, because I've heard that dying is something to be done in silence. Keep your peace, and be strong.' That made us ashamed, and we held back our weeping.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Socrates’ friends are criticized for acting like women. Even when it is not women who weep, it is feminine to weep. While Socrates’ male companions lament as his death fast approaches, Socrates is critical of this behavior, signaling that it is the expected behavior of their female counterparts. This is significant because crying is a natural *human* experience.[[3]](#footnote-3) Men and women have the biological capabilities to shed tears. Scientists discuss three different types of tears: basal, reflex, and emotional.[[4]](#footnote-4) Basal tears keep the eye moist; reflex tears are produced in reaction to foreign materials in the eye; and emotional tears are released when humans come under stress, pain, sadness or when large shifts in feeling occur.[[5]](#footnote-5) Men and women alike are capable of shedding tears of each type, though in this paper, I will focus on emotional tears and their relation to a constructed femininity.

Literature and history document the tears of numerous men and women alike, yet often in Western culture, crying is characterized as feminine, which can take on a variety of meanings. For example, for moral philosopher Adam Smith, femininity was associated with weakness. He expressed this opinion clearly in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: “If we shed any tears, we carefully conceal them, and are afraid, lest the spectators, not entering into this excessive tenderness, should regard it as effeminacy and weakness.” [[6]](#footnote-6) For reporters following the political career of Speaker of the House John Boehner, tears demonstrate his sensitive side, feminizing him.[[7]](#footnote-7) Women who cry in public are not immune to charges of femininity or weakness. Hillary Clinton’s well-known emotional moment on the day before the 2008 New Hampshire primary spurred a storm of commentary, with every pundit wanting to weigh in on whether or not the tears were real or of the crocodile variety. Men who cry in public are called weak, sensitive, feminine. Women who shed tears in public conform to expected gender norms. Clinton’s tears produced shock in the public precisely because the persona she presented to the public was one lacking emotion, or, one could say, lacking femininity.[[8]](#footnote-8) Crying, though possible in all humans, is a gendered activity; it is assigned the female gender.

This is why a feminist must write about crying, because although crying is a natural phenomenon[[9]](#footnote-9), it is considered or constructed as feminine. In this paper, I advance the argument that crying is actually part of the performance of gender; it is a performative act that helps convey and constitute femininity. It is for this reason that men and women may be judged for their tears, because of the performative quality of this action. This analysis rests on the assumption that gender is not innate but constructed, and members of any sex may participate in the performance of either (or any) gender.[[10]](#footnote-10) Further, the variance between reactions to men and women who cry in public can be explained in part by the relationship to the gender performed by tears and the congruence of this gender with the displayed sex of the individual.

This paper will proceed as follows: in the next section I will briefly discuss J. L. Austin’s notion of performative utterances and explore Judith Butler’s expansion of this idea in gender studies. Butler’s conception of performativity is an expansion of Austin’s theory, and it is Butler’s notion of performativity that I apply to the act of crying. I will then turn to the argument that crying is a performative act that conveys the female gender to both the individual who experiences the act as well as those who observe said individual. By arguing that crying is part of the performance of gender, I will offer support to Butler’s claim that gender is something that one does; it is an act through which a subject becomes socially intelligible.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, I will expand upon Butler’s notion of performativity by moving beyond drag to include natural phenomenon. Ultimately, by moving from performative utterances, to the performativity of gender, to crying as a performative act, I wish to expose the ways in which gendered meaning has been read into the biological phenomenon of crying itself.

**Performative Utterances and Performativitiy**

J. L. Austin’s notion of performative utterances challenges the standard understanding of the functions of sentences and speech. For Austin, sentences do not only passively describe a given reality, but can also change the social reality they describe.[[12]](#footnote-12) Specifically, utterances that are first person singular indicative active (i.e. “I promise”) are performative utterances. That is, a person making an utterance of this sort is doing something, not simply describing something that may be true or false.[[13]](#footnote-13) In saying what one is doing, one is performing a type of action. If I say, “I do,” as a bride, I am actually changing reality; I transform from a bride to a wife. In one utterance, I can alter the reality I describe. Austin contends that the uttering of a performative is actually the display of an illocutionary action, which is a specific type of action whose performance cannot be reduced to mere description.[[14]](#footnote-14) Further, performative utterances may be socially contested, which means that the utterance does not just affect the reality of the subject, but its audience as well. Austin’s notion of performative utterances challenges the standard understanding of speech as descriptive in nature, and opens up the possibility that speech might construct reality. It is the performative aspect of speech that aids in social construction.

Austin’s account of performative utterances is generally confined to speech acts. Butler adopts Austin’s notion and expands upon it beyond the field of spoken language. Butler’s conception of performativity includes a variety of actions, behaviors and gestures, all situated within their larger social context. For Butler, gender is performative.[[15]](#footnote-15) That is, the performance of gender creates gender. The performative understanding of gender is opposed to gender as an expression of some innate or natural essence:

“Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Butler likens the performance of gender to theatrical performances, in which each individual is the actor in the play. However, she sees theatrical performance as less threatening since there is a clear distinction between reality and theater. Gender performances create and recreate reality, and can produce fear when they stray from accepted gender norms. In the performance of gender, the actor becomes the object rather than the subject of constitutive acts.[[17]](#footnote-17) Butler’s notion of gender as performative destabilizes the locus of agency, and reconceptualizes identity as constituted through the repetition of acts, which engender a socially constructed stylization of the body. In line with Simone de Beauvoir’s famous proclamation that, “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman,”[[18]](#footnote-18) performative gender views women as constructs of history and culture. Butler does not deny the existence of the material body, but argues that gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts receive meaning from the social and cultural context in which they occur. These acts also create these contexts. Gender should not be understood as a role that expresses an interior ‘self’; instead, gender is an external act that constructs the social fiction of its psychological interiority.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The previous statement must be unpacked a bit. Butler’s argument centers around the idea that gender is performative, which locates gender outside the body. However, one of the most curious aspects of gender is that it is most often interpreted as the expression of an internal truth or essence. For example, I appear as a woman because this is an external expression of my internal or hidden sexual organs. Butler disagrees with this idea. The performativity of gender constructs this social fiction by representing internalized gender norms, not by expressing internal essences. The expression of these norms has a reifying effect. In this sense, a person’s identity is modeled in terms of the ‘normal’, or the socially or culturally accepted norms of a society. By wearing a dress, I am identified as a woman; my appearance is associated with the possession of female sex organs, which is associated with some essence. But I wear the dress for a variety of reasons. I want to convey that I am a woman, that I have a material female body. I wear the dress because society tells me that women wear dresses. I wear the dress because it is socially acceptable for women, not men to wear dresses. But for Butler, these norms have been internalized; they do not express identity but constitute and reify that identity. I become a woman through the performance of norms that stylize my body as a woman’s. With these actions, I construct the illusion that a gendered self abides within my psyche through the external expression of the very gender I wish to be. These acts, mundane as wearing a dress, throwing a ball poorly, or screaming when you see a mouse, produce a body that bears cultural meanings that establish gender. However, Butler wishes to seize upon the constructed nature of these norms, challenging the norms themselves by exposing the corporeal acts that construct cultural meaning. Her theory seeks to create space for gender troubling, which involves dismantling the ‘natural’ character of the gender binary, unfixing the supposed links between acts and categories. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler offers a lengthy discussion of cross-dressing, which might serve the purpose of mocking the expressive model of gender, as well as exposing the dissonance possible between gender and performance.

This interpretation of actions and behavior expands upon both Austin’s notion of performative utterances by moving beyond speech acts, as well as phenomenological theory of acts, to convey both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is enacted. In this sense, the body becomes a gender through a variety of socially-governed acts. This leads to the seeming coherence of categories of sex, gender and sexuality, but Butler’s contention is that these are all socially constructed through the repetition of conventionalized acts. Gender identity should be understood as free and flexible, performative instead of essential.[[20]](#footnote-20) However, Butler’s work also challenges biological accounts of binary sex, contending that the sexed body is also socially constructed through socially regulative discourse.[[21]](#footnote-21) The very ‘obviousness’ of sex as a natural, biological fact only attests to how deeply its production via discourse is concealed, and if the sexed body is accepted as natural, this functions as a type of ‘alibi’ for constructions of gender and sexuality on its basis. There is really no sex that is not always already gender.[[22]](#footnote-22)

What is most challenging about Butler’s account is that it destabilizes our reality. It seems problematic to analyze the fact that I put on a dress this morning, or take comfort in the fact that a male friend will correct my flimsy toss of a football. These are simply mundane acts that punctuate my daily existence. But, for Butler, these acts are highly significant, because they illustrate the performativity of gender. By performing these acts, I don’t demonstrate my femininity, I construct it as a reality. In the same way that Austin’s interpretation of “I do,” was a transformative speech act, my seemingly mundane actions generate that which it presupposes, that I am a woman with a female body. These acts function as a discursive part of gender formation, constituting the identity they presuppose, contesting the very notion of a fixed subject. These acts are dependent on the sedimentation of meaning from the past, because they involve a reiteration of that which has already been accepted and constructed.[[23]](#footnote-23) It is through citation and repetition that meaning begins to occupy the space of a norm. Austin refers to this type of process in his discussion of referential speech acts which enable meaning to be transferred from one act to another. For Butler, sex and gender are examples of Derridian citation, in which their expression recalls the socially accepted norms. Repetition is crucial to the performative notion of gender, because this is the mechanism that enables certain qualities take on the character of norms, which are regularized and ultimately constrained through repetition. Moreover, gender performance is not a single act, but a ritualized production, reiterated through the force of prohibition and taboo, compelling the shape of the production while not determining it in advance. The feminine gender is enacted by its reiterative performance; but it is assigned meaning through social norms.

Butler’s idea of the performativity of gender opens up a wealth of possibilities by destabilizing the sexed and gendered subject. It involves what Sarah Ahmed calls a “paradoxical temporality.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The performative act can only succeed if it repeats a coded utterance or act that cites existent norms or conventions. So it is simultaneously historically grounded and future-generative. Taken together, these two qualities open up the future by repeating the past. By repeating something, the possibility of moving towards a different meaning or purpose is opened up. It is the very iterability of an act that opens up the possibility of cutting a sign off from its context.[[25]](#footnote-25) For Butler, this is exemplified through the parody of drag. Parody is possible because it involves actions that are historically associated with a set of gender norms (women wear dresses, to return to the example from above). It is dependent, in some sense, on the existence of a gender binary. Parody draws attention to the constructedness of the binary because it highlights the disjunction between the body of the performer (male, here), and the gender being performed (female through dress).[[26]](#footnote-26) Drag reveals the contingency inherent in the relationship between sex and gender. It also highlights an important element of performativity: all signs or acts are vulnerable to appropriation and reiteration. Signs can be transplanted into new contexts, producing new meaning as a function of this relocation. Derrida calls this ‘citational grafting’.[[27]](#footnote-27)

A man performing as a woman through drag highlights the constructedness of sex and gender for Butler, by detaching acts (wearing a dress, putting on make-up) from their standard contexts, and thus destabilizing their meanings (from female body/female to male body/female, which represents a disjunction). Again, this is possible because of the construction and reconstruction of the gender binary. Before I move on to address where crying might fit into this complicated tangle of meaning production and interpretation, I want to first call attention to a major element that is often underplayed in discussions of performance and performativity: the audience. If, for Butler, performativity is about the constructedness of sex and gender, then it seems prudent to address the role of the spectators. These actions are never simply performed to the audience of the subject itself, but always in the company of others. The sedimentation of norms seems impossible without a community to repeat their constitutive acts. Further, norms do not take on their normative quality without the approval of the observing populace. And so, drag accomplishes its destabilization of gender norms in part because there is an audience to observe and interpret these actions; an audience who is aware of the established norms, who, in fact, lives these norms in their daily lives. While the performative actions are significant for the individual who enacts them, because they constitute the identity of that individual at the moment of performance, these actions are also crucial for the community because they reveal the constructed nature of said ‘norms’, and reveal the reconstructive potential of any number of actions.

Drag, then, is not just a commentary on the constructedness of norms, but an expository moment that both communicates the contingency of gender and sex, and urges the audience to re-appropriate and reconstruct said norms. The audience does not possess a passive role, but instead possesses the ability to deconstruct norms by rejecting the form of reiteration. Butler’s parody draws attention to the constructed nature of gender and sex, but also invites the audience to reject the norms, to refuse their reification, by seizing the opportunity to transform reality through affixing a new set of meanings to a given action, and taking part in the reproduction of this new meaning. Recognizing the performativity of gender and sex norms, opens up ways to challenge these norms. The challengers lie within the community. But what are the tools that the challengers might use?

For Austin, the tools are linguistic. They are confined to the world of language and speech. Performativity is confined to speech acts. Butler expands the toolbox of the would-be challengers to include any behavior, actions, or gestures that are understood as gender-normative. However, Butler’s expansion, particularly the way she employs this toolbox around parody, seems to focus on non-biological behaviors or gestures. That is, Butler’s performativity seems to highlight actions like wearing dresses, putting on make-up, throwing balls. Yet, this formulation leaves open the potential for expanding her interpretation further still to consider the performative quality of ‘natural’ or ‘biological’ actions, such as crying. Here, the object of analysis or potential for transformation is located in a bodily or biological act, but the meaning of this act is constructed in much of the same way Butler characterizes the meaning of gender. As Butler challenges the sex binary and gender norms, as well as the actions and signs that constitute these concepts, it follows logically to extend her notion of performativity to the very actions that are natural or biological, in the sense that they occur as a biological function. These functions should be understood as part of the performativity of sex and gender.

It is in this context that it seems appropriate for a feminist to write about crying. The remainder of this paper will use crying to demonstrate how we should expand our notion of performative acts to include the very things that seem natural or biological, as well as how this follows logically from Butler’s notion of performativity. I will return to the various themes addressed in this section through the lens of one’s tears.

**Crying as Performative?**

Crying seems like one of the most natural things that an individual can experience. Babies cry, adults cry; men cry, women cry; everyone cries- it is a biological phenomenon that can communicate a variety of messages. Every human possesses the biological capacity to shed tears. The sheer pervasiveness of it generates a range of questions. First, if crying seems so natural, can it really be understood as a performative act? Is this a valid application of Butler’s idea? Second, in the same vein, is it imperative that we consciously enact the performative elements, or can we do so unconsciously? Are we always aware of the constructed nature of reality? And third, does crying contain the potential to transform reality in some way? I argue that it is precisely because of crying’s ubiquity that we can understand it as a performative act, and even the unconscious performance, that is crying without intent to construct or subvert norms, can be understood in terms of performativity. Finally, it is because of its very familiarity and its often-unnoticed role in the construction, communication, and reification of gender norms that makes crying an excellent site of investigation into the application of performativity and its implications. I will draw heavily on examples of female politicians to better illustrates these claims, in part because they clearly occur in a public setting, which involves a public audience, and generates a set of interpretable observations and reactions, as a means to gauge the gender norm and the way crying interacts with said norm.

The universal capacity to cry across genders seems to challenge the claim that crying is involved in the performance of the female gender. If both men and women cry, how can crying be considered part of the performance which constitutes femininity? On the surface, this seems like a formidable challenge to the claim, but once we move away from the universal experience of crying towards its meaning, its performative quality becomes more coherent.[[28]](#footnote-28) By exploring the meaning of this experience, which is assigned to crying through its interpretation, the constructedness[[29]](#footnote-29) of the meaning becomes more apparent. The concept of performativity includes both the experience (crying) and its meaning (interpretation of crying). It is related to both the individual act and the meaning of that act. Further, it is the universality of this phenomenon that enables the challenge to its meaning. This question requires that we examine instances in which both men and women cry, and attempt to understand the similarities and differences among them.

Crying politicians are particularly useful here, since their positions are typically subject to public scrutiny, which allows consideration of audience interpretation, and the connection to constructedness. Hillary Clinton infamously cried[[30]](#footnote-30) in an interview on the night before the New Hampshire primary in 2008. Photographer Marianne Pernold Young asked Clinton, “how do you do it?”[[31]](#footnote-31), which caused Clinton’s voice to break and her eyes to well up as she delivered her answer. Clinton’s tears generated extensive reactions in the press and in the public at-large. Pernold Young expressed surprise at Clinton’s display of emotion and that she allowed herself to feel.[[32]](#footnote-32) Rebecca Traister’s book, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, maps a variety of reactions to Clinton’s tears. At one point, a description of Clinton’s tears is punctuated with exclamation points: “And then she cried. Sort of…Then came the sound of her voice breaking…Hillary had cried! She’d cried!”[[33]](#footnote-33) MSNBC anchor Chris Matthews’ reaction follows a different pattern, remarking that Clinton’s performance was “good enough for women who wanted to root for her anyway,” which implies that her tears would not sway rational decision-makers.[[34]](#footnote-34) Crying is cast as a manipulative tactic, juxtaposed to rational, thoughtful behavior. Matthews places manipulation and emotional responses in the feminine category, assigning this behavior to women supporters of Hilary. Each of these reactions displays that the commentator is uneasy with the tears to a different degree. Pernold Young and Traister are surprised, and Matthews is dismissive, perhaps displaying his distaste. These reactions seem to coalesce around some perplexing element in Clinton’s tears. Exploratory analyses presented in a variety of newspaper articles all seemed to circle back to the same trope: Clinton’s tears reveal her femininity. For some, this is an admirable quality. For others, like Matthews here, this is a problematic trait. The immediate reaction around Hillary’s tears seemed to focus on emotionality, femininity, and how detrimental this would be to her campaign. But, Clinton’s tears and the subsequent responses seem to play into the constructedness of these interpretations and their meaning.

Current Speaker of the House, John Boehner, also has quite a reputation for crying. He cries when discussing children, soldiers, his upbringing, to name a few areas. When he presented Neil Armstrong with the Congressional Gold Medal to mark the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing, he began to weep. One attendee found Boehner’s reaction startling, referring to his sobbing as “sort of off-putting.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Boehner also cried as he accepted the gavel from former Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Critics have said that his tendency to shed tears makes him look weak or strange.[[36]](#footnote-36) Boehner has publically addressed this criticism, responding that he wears his emotions on his sleeve, and will not apologize for being emotionally attached to the things he feels strongly about. These sentiments both echo some of Clinton’s in the wake of her infamous tears, as well as stand in stark contrast to them. In the moment that Clinton teared up, she explained that she was very invested in the future of the country; the campaign was not just political and not just public, but it was personal, and she was personally invested.[[37]](#footnote-37) Yet, following the incident, during her victory speech in New Hampshire, she tried to downplay the tears. Some authors have attributed this to the way in which Clinton, as a woman, needed to appear stronger, more resolute, more in control than her male counterparts. Traister cites the immediate reaction surrounding Clinton as one that recognized her femininity, but to her detriment: “It’s over. A woman having shown emotions? It’s done.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Yet, while Clinton and Boehner themselves may have reacted differently to critics of their tears, the public seems to react similarly in both cases. In the cases of both Clinton and Boehner, there is an element of surprise and sometimes distaste in response to their tears. The criticism of Boehner’s tendency to cry is striking in this regard. I think it is possible to understand these reactions as reaction to the tears and what the tears symbolize, as well as the disjunction they create between the perceived sex and gender of Boehner in that moment. Crying carries with it sedimented meaning, created over time. Its meaning is associated with women; and thus the act of crying in itself is gendered. The quotations referred to at the outset of this paper demonstrated this trope in the work of Plato; in the writing of Smith; in popular culture; even perhaps intuitively. Reactions to Boehner, then, demonstrate discomfort because they perceived a man (referring to the body’s sex) performing an action that is associated with women. So the activity is gendered; it is associated with women and thus assigned a gender that follows this association. This follows, to some extent for Clinton as well.

One of Clinton’s major challenges over the course of the campaign was to be seen as a candidate, instead of a female candidate. To accomplish this feat, Clinton was often accused of underplaying or outright ignoring her femininity.[[39]](#footnote-39) In her autobiography, Madeline Kunin, first female governor of Vermont, recalls that she was once asked whether she wanted to be a man or a woman during a discussion of equal rights. She replied with, “I want to be a human being.”[[40]](#footnote-40) By emphasizing her humanity, Kunin is degendering herself. This doesn’t challenge the binary, but reinforces it through fear. Kunin is afraid of the gender she performs with teas. In this vein, she also recounts a number of occasions where she held back tears, or was conscious of the way her tears could compromise her authority or position. So, the reaction to Boehner’s tears reveal perhaps the perplexing nature of the disjunction between male body and feminine action, but Clinton’s and Kunin’s tears tap into something more fundamental about the meaning assigned to crying. Kunin’s reluctance to cry in public, and her consciousness of what those tears might signify to her audience speaks to the sedimented norms that she perceives to operate in society. Kunin’s consciousness simultaneously signals awareness of the constructedness of said norms, but also of the extent to which they are embedded, or taken as fact. She was unwilling to take part in the reification of said gender norms: that women cry and are weak and the like. She is afraid of the way her actions reinforce and reconstruct a binary that she does not want projected onto her. Examining crying and its reactions through the lens of performativity accentuate its constructedness, which is evident in Kunin’s attempt to suppress or hide her tears.

The reactions to Boehner’s tears tell a similar story. The criticism voiced by members of the public over his constant crying connects crying to weakness. These reactions do not necessarily establish a connection to femininity themselves, but if we view Boehner’s tears in terms of history, I argue that it is possible to interpret them as symbolic of the feminine, and thus extrapolate the public’s discomfort by understanding the disjunction between a male performing a feminine action. Further, Boehner himself acknowledged that crying is not the normal reaction of a prominent public figure.[[41]](#footnote-41) It is the recourse to the word, ‘normal,’ that is curious. This demonstrates both the perception and constituting of a norm. Boehner understands the norm to reflect that he should not cry. However, by recognizing this norm, he further expresses or concretizes its existence. He produces his tears as a forbidden act, but it is an act that he performs nonetheless. To some extent, his recognition of the norm serves to reject his own experience; it may even dehumanize him in that moment. Again, I return to the idea that crying is a universal phenomenon; so what is not ‘normal’ about it? For Butler, gender identity is always modeled in terms of ‘the normal’, and all gender is performative, representing an internalized notion of these gender norms.[[42]](#footnote-42) By looking at male and female public figures who cry, and examining the similarities between the experiences (played out through female suppression and male rejection of the same ‘natural’ action), it is possible to understand the way the norm works and its relation to gender construction, at least in part. It is precisely this constructedness that makes crying a prime candidate for analysis as a performative action.

Kunin, Clinton, and Boehner all appear conscious of their lachrymosity and the meaning constructed around their tears. However, as crying is a natural, widely experienced phenomenon, not every person who cries is conscious of the way tears perform the construction of meaning or constitute a gender identity. Is it possible for a performative act to occur without conscious participation in it? This gets at some of the fundamental elements in Butler’s conceptualization of performativity as well as crying’s relationship to this theory. For Butler, gender is a construction that involves a tacit, collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain it.[[43]](#footnote-43) In its construction gender regularly conceals its genesis, and understanding crying as an act of construction that works towards this concealment might be helpful. This concealment can and does happen even for those taking part in the actions, which seems to illustrate the ‘tacit’ quality of agreement that Butler expresses in her own discussion of gender performance. Crying, then, as a widely experienced phenomenon, hides its constructive nature. It seems counterintuitive to understand a natural phenomenon that happens across sexes as constitutive of gender. However, this is consistent with the facticity that is assumed with regard to the sex and gender binaries. Gender construction necessarily conceals its genesis, and ‘authors’ of gender become entranced in their own fictions. This seems consistent with the idea that performative acts might not always be conscious enactments or even voluntary choices, but part of a larger structure in which certain possibilities exist, and are then repeated and ritualized. These performances or repetition create the subject. Gender is performed without being conscious of it; but performativity is not automatic or mechanical, in the sense that it reflects some inner ‘self’ or ontological core gender. It can be performed without being conscious of it because it is the product of pervasive cultural norms.

Further, Butler’s theory examines the ways in which gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, as well as the transformative potential of these acts. Crying seems to represent a different type of corporeal act than those examined by Butler. Dressing in drag uses the body as a site for construction, whereas crying comes from the body itself. Both are ostensibly corporeal acts, yet one is on the body, whereas the other is of the body. Instead of taking a cultural object and recasting it’s meaning in context, like a dress on a drag queen, crying would take a biological function and reshape the context itself. The transformative potential of a given phenomenon is realized by dislocating the performative act from its cultural context. Crying is seen as feminine, so women who cry reinforce this norm and recreate this context. Men who cry and reject or even justify their tears fabricate the same norms. Crying men, who accept their tears without recognizing that they are not seen as ‘normal’, have transformative potential. By crying and refusing to acknowledge some latent normalcy, male acts of tears can be conceived of as possessing the power to alter reality. This reinforces the idea that any utterance or action can be removed from its context; this involves tampering with the generative and historical aspects of the action. Male tears are thought to be feminine because they are built on the way crying has been characterized over a long period of time. This is reinforced when a man who cries recognizes that he is not normal. However, if the man who cries refers to his tears as normal, perhaps citing their naturalness, this could work towards creating a new reality in which tears are no longer a vehicle for the performance of the feminine gender, or the performance of gender at all. Of course, this necessitates the participation of many to create a new norm, but the idea that crying is constructed as emblematic of the feminine gender carries with it the possibility for shattering that relationship.

Women who cry are often thought of as stereotypical, because it can be understood as strengthening the pre-existing norms that women are emotional, weak, unable to control their emotions. This idea has existed since antiquity; the quote that appears earlier in this paper, which one of the final scenes of Socrates’ life, clearly expresses these sentiments. Further, as a woman who cries often, I am always conflicted about what message my tears assert, or about what image they create. Someone in the audience always rushes to find tissues, handing them to me with a look of pity or discomfort, or both. Tears make people uncomfortable; women’s tears draw forth this entire history of weakness and emotionality that is evident over time. In one sense, it is ‘normal’ that a woman deigns to cry, because of the two, she is the weaker sex. But in another sense, this is inappropriate, because women also represent the private sphere, and tears, or other emotions are associated with the private sphere.[[44]](#footnote-44) Bringing emotions out in public interrupts the clean divide between the public and private realms. If we accept this understanding of tears as a type of interruption, it is also possible to envision the transformative potential of women’s tears. By crying in public, and producing this as normal behavior, women can also create a new reality through their tears. Further, women might also disrupt the norm and reconstitute it by performing acts traditionally associated with men, and publically crying during these acts. For example, what kind of statement would be made by a female construction worker who hauls concrete slabs at a worksite, and cries the entire time? There would be a disjunction between the physical display of strength, which is arguably not associated with women, and the representation of weakness, which is. Of course, this type of action is dangerous, because it runs the risk of reifying the problematic norms. It is possible to interpret the worker’s tears as an expression that she is incapable of performing the act. The actor would have to be cognizant of this, and somehow make it clear to her audience that crying was a sign of her strength. Because these norms that are associated with tears are ingrained and internalized to such a considerable degree, it would be difficult to dismantle them. However, there is transformative potential within the tears of men and women alike, in part because of their universality, and in part because of the constructedness of their meaning. It is simply a question of recognizing the potential to create meaning through actions that we see as universal and mundane, like tears.

**Conclusion**

I began this paper by remarking that it seemed cliché for a woman, a feminist to write about crying, but I end this paper with precisely the opposite sentiment. It seems imperative that a feminist must write about crying. Norms are established and reinforced through the repetition of performances that gain the title of convention or conventional understanding. In order to dismantle these norms, we must cut the acts that constitute said norms off from their historical context; we must create new meaning. Crying is universal; it does not only happen in women, yet it is associated with femininity, and any number of characteristics that are thought to be inherently feminine. However, we can use the act of crying, in its universality, to challenge the gender binary and its ‘norms’. Like a speech act, the act of crying generates a subject, as well as a community of witnesses. It seems necessary to use the very performance of tears to generate a subject that is not always already gendered as female. This can only be done by assigning a new set of cultural meanings to tears that do not participate in the gender binary. This can be done by disrupting reality in any number of ways, a variety of which were discussed here.

This paper only scratches the surface with regard to the transformative potential of mundane and universal actions, such as crying. Crying is an action that has become gendered, but should not be. This theme returns again and again, in the media, in literature, in the history of political thought. Examining the constructed nature of gender norms helps point out potential paths for transforming this accepted reality through the destabilization of these norms. However, that destabilization must use the act of crying itself to reconstruct a new set of meanings outside of the older, gendered meanings. It is possible to extend the preliminary insights of this paper deeper into the construction of femininity through crying. Probing the different ways in which crying generates discomfort in an audience seems like a worthwhile direction for further research and theorizing. More clearly understanding the relationship between crying and femininity, and all of its complexities would also further the ambitions of this research project. This project attempted to tease out the constructedness of gender through crying and the transformative potential that exists in biological functions that are gendered. This could be further explored with a deeper conception of the relationship between crying, gender, and construction. This paper constitutes the beginning of a new reality in which we consider the constructedness of meaning through even the most mundane actions, and we use that nature towards destabilization, instead of reification. Any action might have revolutionary potential, and for a feminist, this is profoundly powerful.

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1. Madeleine Kunin, *Living a Political Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1994) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Plato, *Phaedo*, 117c [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tom Lutz, *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1999), 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lutz (1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jennifer Steinhaur, “John Boehner and the Politics of Crying,” *New York Times* (Nov. 6, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rebecca Traister, *Big Girls Don’t Cry: The Election that Changed Everything for American Women* (New York: Free Press, 2010) 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. When I use the term universal phenomenon, what I mean is that all individuals have the biological capacity to cry. I am not suggesting that all individuals cry equal amounts. I want to highlight the tension between the biological, natural capacity that exists in humans to cry and the socially constructed understanding of this phenomenon. There has been much research in psychology and neuroscience regarding humans’ capacity to cry. Different studies have reached different conclusions, some saying that women cry more, others saying that crying is a function of context. The purpose here is to highlight the fact that all humans can and often do cry, yet our understanding of this phenomenon is heavily gendered. It should be noted, additionally, that while many studies find that women cry more than men, most studies also find that no difference between the sexes exists until adolescence. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I will expand upon this point in the next sections [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal,* Vol. 40, 4 (Dec., 1988) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid 531 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011 [1949]) 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Butler (1988), 528 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Butler (1990), 180 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Sarah Salih, “On Judith Butler and Performativity” in *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader* (Washington DC: Sage Publications, 2007) eds. Karen E. Lovaas and Mercilee M. Jenkins [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004). 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ahmed (2004),92 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid: This point is taken from Derrida. Ahmed points this out. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Butler (1990), 136: . But Butler’s argument does not stop at the constructedness of gender; the constructedness of sex is also apparent. Sex is also always performative, because bodies are never merely described, but always constituted in the act of description, much like Austin’s performative utterances. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, tr. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. I will be exploring crying in Western cultures, primarily because this is the cultural context with which I am familiar. I will draw on specific examples but I am generalizing here. I am aware that my claims do not hold for every instance of crying, but I am trying to draw out an argument that seems plausible here. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I want to be clear that I am not arguing that crying does not occur; individuals shed tears, and cry. The constructedness that I attempt to highlight here is related to the social construction of meaning and significance around crying. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. There is of course a debate over whether Clinton shed tears or not, and if she did, if the tears were real. I personally believe that Clinton did cry, and that these tears had performative potential. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Kate Snow and Jennifer Parker,“Woman Who Made Clinton Cry Voted for Obama” <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Vote2008/story?id=4109322> (Jan 9, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Kate Snow, “Clinton Gets Emotional on Campaign Trail” <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2008/01/clinton-gets-em/> (Jan 8, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Traister (2010), 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid, 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Jennifer Bendery ,“John Boehner Bawls Through Congressional Award Ceremony” *The Huffington Post* (Nov 16, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Snow, “Clinton Gets Emotional on Campaign Trail” (Jan 8, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Traister (2010), 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Traister (2010), 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Kunin, (1994), 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Steinhaur, “John Boehner and the Politics of Crying,” (Nov. 6, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Butler (1988); Butler (1990) [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Butler (1988), 521 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ahmed (2004), 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)