



ON THE GRAMMARS OF BEING: The Privilege & Practice of Illegibility

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There is an eternal tension between the cosmic impulse to standardize and the cosmic impulse to queer. This is nothing less than the primordial dichotomy of chaos and order at play in all things: in our cells, in the wild, in the activity of celestial bodies, and in human behavior. Queerness exists as a force of the universe larger than the concept of gender. We normally only understand queerness as an attribute of gender, but gender is just one form of codification; in its nature as a means of codification, not just queer/ness/ing but gender itself, too, becomes recognizable as having nothing at all to do with gender.

That is because gender does not exist. Although it is a very real part of our lived experiences and identities, on a deeper level it is essentially a social construct. Feminist scholar Judith Butler's theory of performativity argues that gender is not something one has, but something one *does*.¹ Gender is not something that is essential, natural, or inherent to our bodies or being, but is, through this lens, nothing more than a form of organization, of categorization, akin to alphabetizing documents if you will. There is nothing inherent about alphabetized documents that means that one ought to be placed before or after another; alphabetization is only a human mechanism that makes use of letters by sorting them a certain way.

If grammar can be defined as “a common system to make meaning from words in particular arrangements,”² then it can be said that the grammar ascribed to language is similar to the grammar of gender ascribed to bodies. Gender does not arise from within the body, but descends upon it from the society the given body is immersed in. So if gender is not something one has, but something one *does*, then *queer*, too, can be understood in this vein not as a noun, not as a quality, but as a verb. What is most essential, and what brings us finally to writing, is that *queering* is something one can do to writing.

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

² Rachel Larowe, “[Grammar Does\(n't\) Matter.](#)” *Inkwell*, 2016.

Queer is defined by Karen Barad as a “radically deconstructive way of being . . . a radical questioning of identity and binaries.”³ Therefore, mobilizing *queer* as a verb would mean to radically deconstruct given systems of meaning. This act of repurposing, disrupting, recontextualizing modes of standardization is not always intentional; it can happen because of a failure to correctly understand or perform a given grammar. This can be the traditional grammar of writing, or the grammar, as we understand it now, of gender—or of other codifications such as race or class. These forms of codification do come with very real lived experiences related to violence, access, and privilege, but their existence as a form of codification is entirely socially constructed and is not essential to the individual as such. Failure to correctly perform a given grammar, written or otherwise, is risky. The ability to consciously disrupt or queer any given grammar without fear of consequence, then, requires privilege.

My inspiration for this article comes from the realization of my own privilege in my previously unnuanced belief that queering is always good, that it is always an act that subverts dominant power structures. In thinking about this seriously, I have come to realize that the ability to intentionally subvert these grammars requires the ability to comprehend and perform them in the first place.

I’m also willing to ask if standardization, and grammars, do more than punish, control, and constrain that which would, without them, be more vibrant, authentic, and full of life. Perhaps standardization helps us to understand each other, to be legible to one another. Perhaps we need systems of meaning in order to make sense of each other, to each other; I am, after all, performing my understanding of intelligible grammar right now in order to communicate to you. Maybe it’s impossible, or at least would be unbearably prohibitive of social life, to not have systems of meaning; after all, order is one half of that primordial dichotomy. So maybe standardization does perform a useful and needed function if we are ever to form any kind of collectivity from within the depths of our individual experiences.

But the nature of making meaning in an oppressive society is delicate and precarious. Who gets to determine what is standard and what is nonstandard? Who gets to participate in deciding what we are standardizing to? Who gets to decide what the common ground is for where and how we make sense of one another, to one another?

The social syntaxes of patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, violent normalization—are these the grammars in which we desire to be legible? Maybe, depending on who we are describing as “we.” For those of us who have faced delegitimization by these paradigms, are these really the codes we desire to be made legible by? I certainly dissent. As a genderqueer / nonbinary / genderanarchist / whatever person, I often feel most curious about the possibilities of being *intentionally illegible*, or at least being illegible to those codes of standardization.

Maybe, applying this line of questioning to the consciousness and work of being a tutor, it comes down to our writer’s intended *desire* to be legible: many styles of writing do not attempt to play in the

³ Karen Barad, [“Nature’s Queer Performativity.”](#) *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 121.

realm of illegibility as an inspired act. How can tutors welcome the expansion of our work and our selves into this play without condemning or inhibiting our writer's gentle desire to be understood? How can we be critical of oppression and creative in our experimentation without becoming unwilling to lend our knowledge of legibility in support of our writer's desire to engage with the pool of social discourse? That is to say, there is a difference between *choosing* to queer and destabilize oppressive standardization with full knowledge of expected syntax and legibility, with full knowledge of this act as intentional dissent, and simply *not knowing* how one is expected to use a comma, a sentence, or a language (like English) at all. The ability to queer writing and legibility appears, then, as a privilege. Thus, both the ability to define standardization, to acquiesce to standardization, as well as the ability to dissent to and destabilize standardization, are privileges.

As a writing tutor, this means being conscious of my compulsions to queer when responding to student writing. When I'm tutoring students who struggle with the impossible gymnastics that is the English language (which, to be honest, is all of us), it is important that I support, not deter, them in meeting the standards of grammar that their writing is reaching for. Being recognizable within established codes in an oppressive society is, after all, a survival mechanism.

It's so hard for me to conceive of teasing apart standardization from its legacy of violence. Grammars, of language and of being, have been universally weaponized throughout the entirety of human history in order to enforce the dominant order: when literacy tests have been used to prohibit people of color from voting,⁴ when a person is harassed in public for speaking a language other than English,⁵ when bias against an individual's imperfect use of an impossible and contradictory language creates an additional obstacle to academic and professional opportunity.⁶ When oppressed groups resist the injustices that are inflicted upon them, they are reprimanded, often with extreme and lethal measures.⁷

Because of the historical weight that grammars carry, it is so difficult for me to imagine a system of meaning that is non-oppressive—whose goal is not to control, with a devastating grip, the expression of humanity, but to truly facilitate meaning. I don't know for sure what such a system of meaning might look like, nor what the blueprint might be for getting there.⁸ What I do know is that our new grammars must be informed by, in fact *founded upon*, the infinite elaborations of human experience and the equally infinite ways of communicating them.

⁴ [“The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow. Tools and Activities.”](#) PBS, 2002.

⁵ [“Video: Racist Rant Unleashed on Mexican Woman Speaking Spanish.”](#) ABC7 Eyewitness News, August 4, 2016.

⁶ William Y. Chin, [“Linguistic Profiling in Education: How Accent Bias Denies Equal Educational Opportunities to Students of Color.”](#) *St. Mary's Law Digital Repository*, 2010.

⁷ Julia Carrie Wong and Sam Levin, [“Standing Rock Protesters Hold Out Against Extraordinary Police Violence.”](#) *The Guardian*, November 29, 2016.

⁸ I have found some guidance in the philosophy of Nonviolent Communication as articulated by Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* and Miki Kashtan's *Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness: Transcending the Legacy of Separation in Our Individual Lives*.