

# 1 Subjectivity, identity and desire

## INTRODUCTION

---

The question of “the subject”, Butler writes in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, ‘is crucial for politics’ (1990: 2). The explicit departure point for Butler’s interrogation of the relation between subjectivity and identity is the discussion, in that text, of the extent to which there is a universal basis for feminist politics. Specifically, the issue she addresses is whether or not the presumption of a series of identities or categories (women, feminism, masculinity, patriarchy, the West), consistent and continuous across historical periods and various cultural sites and contexts, can be justified. Her point is that any feminist political project cannot simply presume or take for granted the terms through which it acts, since such terms (and the meanings associated with them) are the product of the discursive regime and field of power that feminism wishes to challenge. Moreover, there is no point in simply appealing to or working through institutions of authority such as the law, if the field of law is one of the key sites for producing and naturalising the conditions of gender hegemony and violence. In other words, for Butler the politics of identity is always derived from, dependent on, and only explicable in terms of, a prior politics of subjectivity.

## THE SUBJECT OF THE BODY

---

The set of issues Butler takes up in *Subjects of Desire* (1987) and *Gender Trouble*, and then follows and develops throughout her oeuvre (but most particularly in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b)) is derived from Foucault’s observation that ‘juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent’ (Butler

## 6 UNDERSTANDING JUDITH BUTLER

1990: 2). This means that all forms of identity and identification (including those pertaining to gender) are based on and linked to the procedures, processes, techniques and structures of subjectivity, or what Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* refers to as the process of subjection. Therefore in order to have, gain, claim or be assigned an identity, one must be recognisable and explicable within a particular grid of intelligibility that makes subjects appear, and authorises the subject's status as an identity-in-waiting:

Juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not 'show' once the juridical structure of politics has been established ... the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized ... Juridical power inevitably 'produces' what it claims merely to represent ... It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of 'women' ... is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought. (Butler 1990: 2)

Butler's discussion of the 'Joan/John' case, in *Undoing Gender* (2004), demonstrates how bodies are constituted as recognisable subjects, or otherwise. The case concerns the situation of David Reimer, who was born with XY chromosomes but at an early age had his penis severed in a botched medical operation. After consulting Dr John Money of the Gender Identity Institute, Reimer's parents accepted the strong recommendation that he be raised as a girl. His testicles were surgically removed, and plans made to create a vagina. At the age of nine, however, the renamed 'Brenda' started to behave in a manner and develop preferences (regarding toys, desires, toilet etiquette, etc.) that marked her as different from other girls. This was followed by various attempted medical interventions – all strongly resisted by her – that sought, amongst other things, to dispose and help facilitate Brenda to 'become a girl', in both a medical and a socio-cultural sense:

At this point, the psychiatric teams that were intermittently monitoring Brenda's adaptation offered her estrogen, and she refused this. Money tried to talk to her about getting a real vagina, and she refused; in fact, she went screaming from the room. Money had her view sexually graphic pictures of vaginas. Money even went so far as to show Brenda pictures of women giving birth, holding out the promise that Brenda might be able to give birth if she acquired a vagina ... she and her brother were required to perform mock coital exercises with one another, on command. They both later reported being very frightened and disoriented. (2004: 60)

Money claimed, clearly contrary to the experience of Brenda, that the intervention was both a success and a demonstration that ‘the gender identity gate is open at birth for a normal child no less than for one born with unfinished sex organs’ (p. 61). His critics read his actions as ideologically driven and evidence that biology was ‘sufficient grounds for the presumption of social masculinity’ (p. 63). Butler, on the other hand, is more concerned with showing the:

Disciplinary framework within which Brenda/David develops a discourse of self-reporting and self-understanding, since it constitutes the grid of intelligibility by which his own humanness is both questioned and asserted ... There was an apparatus of knowledge applied to the person and body ... Brenda was subjected to such scrutiny and, most importantly, constantly and repeatedly subjected to a norm, a normalizing ideal that was conveyed through a plurality of gazes, a norm applied to the body ... these exercises interrogate whether the gender norm that establishes a coherent personhood has been successfully accomplished. The inquiries and inspections can be understood ... as the violent attempt to implement the norm, and the institutionalisation of that power of implementation. (pp. 67–8)

If the context and background of sexual and gender identity, for instance, is the presumption and naturalisation of heteronormativity, then the human body becomes explicable within processes of discursive designation and location: the body-as-content is designated as being commensurate, or otherwise, with regard to socio-cultural and/or scientific categories, and is thus inscribed in terms of certain meanings, values, dispositions, orientations and narratives. This is why the case of Brenda/David is scandalous: it denies any obvious consistent or necessary articulation between and across the body, sex and sexuality.

Butler takes up the question of the relation between subjectivity, identity, normalization and the materiality of the body more fully in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). That book is usually read in terms of Butler’s reworking of the notion of gender performativity, a reading partly attributable to criticism that such a notion effectively reduced gender to at best unmediated agency, and at worst a form of fashion. Analysis of this criticism is dealt with elsewhere in this book; what is pertinent here is how *Bodies That Matter* addresses the intractable nature of the body, and how that body plays out within the context of the constitutive powers and work performed by normative discourses. Butler is particularly interested in the

status of corporeality. What does it mean, for instance, to say that the body is ‘constructed’ through norms? Or again, what response can be provided in the face of the ‘truth’ of bodily presence, the self-evidence of materiality, the obviousness of the assertion, made while vigorously patting or prodding oneself, that ‘my stomach exists?’ Butler turns this position on its head by asking how we can possibly come to treat the act of construction, which makes the body intelligible, and organises and enables us to see it, as something ‘artificial and dispensable’ (1993: xi).

Something seemingly as obvious, unmediated and commonsensical as the parts of the body – the stomach, arms, feet, neck, genitals, etc. – are only visible and distinctive in terms of their relation to, and differentiation from, other parts of the overall structure. So for instance in everyday popular (rather than physiological) understanding, the stomach begins somewhere below the chest and ends above the groin and the genitals, and reaches its limits on either side at the hips (below) and the ribs (above); while there is that disconcertingly anonymous area in between that attracts the designation in the absence of a designation, called ‘the side’. At the level of the physiological sciences, while the categories, points of differentiation and specific characteristics that correspond with or constitute the parts of the body are more definite, the charts that neatly plot and represent the parameters and locations of organs, muscles, ligaments, blood vessels and bones disguise the reality that spaces are blurred or shared, categories overlap, and imbrication, rather than separation, is the reality.

When considering how the parts of the body are seen, we have to remember that the various systems of categorisation, explication and representation – the commonsensical everyday, the scientific, the quasi-scientific, the religious, the culinary, and those that are associated with and implicit in popular culture genres such as romance, pornography and sport, to name but a few – are at best connected to and translatable into one another by way of a vague family resemblance, rather than rigorous scientific equation or correspondence. Moreover, this lack of correspondence across systems of categorisation is even more pronounced when we take into account historical and technological differences. The scientific body clearly feeds into and influences the popular version of the body, but in periods prior to the emergence of science (or for that matter, writing) the body, at the level of the commonsensical and everyday, was categorised, organised and recognised in ways that would have

been unthinkable to the contemporary world. We only have to consider Foucault's well-known citation from Borges' fiction regarding:

a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' in which it is written that 'animals' are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (1973: xv)

As Foucault writes, 'In the wonderment of this taxonomy ... the thing that ... is demonstrated', along with the 'exotic charm of another system of thought', is precisely 'the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that' (p. xv).

The point he is making here is that systems of categorisation don't just arrange content: they both naturalise a certain mediated version of the world, and simultaneously render anything else more or less unthinkable. So when Butler refers to the contemporary body being constructed via regulatory systems and forms of normativity, she is referring to the twin operations of production and foreclosure, whereby 'bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas' (1993: xi).

## **NARRATIVES OF THE BODY**

The notion that the construction of the body involves significant variations in systems of categorisation is further complicated because different contexts – historical, cultural, national, religious, economic, political and generic – determine or inflect the way the body is understood, the meanings that are associated with it, and the narratives and values that come to inhabit it. Every cultural field, for instance, not only determines what kinds of bodies are cognate with regard to its particular ethos, values and logics – it also ascribes cultural capital to certain types of bodies and denies it to others. This involves prescribing the forms of bodily hexis (movements, deportment, production of points of focus or emphasis) that are commensurate with, and appropriately represent, the values of a cultural field; and providing each and every body with a narrative (regarding the necessity of transforming the body, the

body becoming aesthetic project, the body being denied, etc.). In some fields (religion, science, the law) the body has a limited, technical or even undesirable status, while in others (sport, advertising, fashion) it is the centre of attention, and largely stands in for, or does the discursive work of, the field.

The same sorts of differences are played out at the level of popular cultural genre. In romance novels and films, for instance, the body has an ambivalent status. To some extent it is something that has to be denied or at least underplayed: given that the *raison d'être* of popular romantic love is the surpassing of the body, the identification of something (a value, an essence, an affinity) that is 'more than this' (love will endure, it will outlast the corporeal), then the body, from this perspective, is the site of false love (temporary physical attraction, lust). If love is eternal and the body is ephemeral, then romantic love cannot be embodied. However given that most popular romance genres and narratives emphasise, or even require, a classically attractive, youthful, or sexually desirable or available body, then some narrative sleight-of-hand is required to ensure that the body matters, without appearing to replace the primacy of the spirit or the soul. The way this is usually done, for instance in contemporary teen films or Disney youth television shows, is to project a correspondence (or otherwise) between physical and spiritual beauty or value; in other words, the real heroine will be attractive, but also good, kind, selfless, caring and loyal, while the false heroine will be attractive in a way that draws attention to her personality failings as a romantic heroine (she will be vain, spend too much time on clothes or make-up). Effectively the real heroine is a beautiful body that denies or downplays – and thus surpasses – the body, while the false heroine is only a body. This, in perhaps the most instantly recognisable example of this point, Snow White, when she is not cooking for the Seven Dwarves, is immobilised and effectively 'out of body', while the Evil Queen is obsessed with her image in the mirror.

Butler asks us to think about which bodies can appear and endure 'within the productive constraints of ... regulatory schemas' (1993: xi). Another, perhaps more specific, way of looking at this issue is to consider the extent to which certain types of bodies fit in with, or correspond to, the norms associated with different socio-cultural narratives, genres and cultural fields. It is not simply a case of whether or not bodies are explicable or otherwise; regulation of the body is also concerned with regimes of value which organise, deploy and arrange bodies within and across spaces, and which facilitate or deny – and naturalise – certain trajectories. Regulation of the body, from this

perspective, is both an act of construction (bodies are brought into being via a grid of intelligibility) and a form of architecture (they are set in motion and disposed in accordance with the arrangement of socio-cultural sites and spaces). Within different cultural fields, for instance, the body is only ‘allowed to endure’ to the extent to which it embodies, and performs in accordance with, a specific ethos. As Bourdieu makes clear with regard to the scientific field, to be admitted does not simply entail satisfying objective criteria and displaying technical competence (in terms of educational qualifications and methodological literacies, say); rather, the scientific habitus must be embodied in a consistent and convincing manner (2004: 51). The conditions within each field generally reflect or perhaps refract regimes of value and narratives characteristic of the wider social field: so the disinterested, rational and serious body of science is also predominantly a male body, even when the scientist is female. As Evelyn Fox Keller points out in her study of the gendering of science, what is at issue is not simply:

the relative absence of women in science. Although it is true that most scientists have been ... men, the makeup of the scientific population hardly counts, by itself, for the attribution of masculinity to science as an intellectual domain ... To both scientists and their public, scientific thought is male thought ... as Simmel observed, objectivity itself is an ideal that has a long history of identification with masculinity ... A woman thinking scientifically or objectively is thinking ‘like a man’. (1985: 76–7)

Much the same kind of specific logic applies in popular culture genres and their narratives. We pointed out that in romance the body is both crucial and irrelevant: what is usually put into play is a conventionally attractive and sexually desirable (which normally means young) body which must be shown to be extraneous to what is at stake (romantic love), or a reflection of inner virtues (a tendency to smile reveals a pleasant nature, a healthy body demonstrates restraint and responsibility). What is clear, however, is that despite its apparent irrelevance, body typologies have a narrative dimension. Although a classically attractive body is not necessarily synonymous with authentic romantic feeling, having a classically unattractive body certainly directs characters away from the position of romantic ‘seriousness’. The older, or awkward, or non-honed body can, in popular culture texts, be in love and be loved in return, and experience genuine romance, but usually at a secondary level – as a comic refraction of, or a narrative supplement to, the main

romance. In other words, while the non-romantic body can experience romance, this is rarely put forward as an exemplary or normal situation; rather it is the exception that proves the rule, and it is precisely in the insistence that the exception can happen (the geek or the so-called overweight character finds love despite their physicality) that we come to recognise that it isn't the norm.

### **BODIES, SUBJECTS AND IDENTITIES**

The work of normalization, then, is carried out by way of the repeated representation and deployment, in popular culture texts and discourses, of bodies that are rendered explicable in terms of certain regimes of value (they are sexually attractive; they incite desire, envy, admiration and identification) and narratives (they are naturally disposed to achieve popularity, happiness, success). Put simply, the norm is what makes each and every body meaningful, and by extension recognisable (or otherwise). This is what Butler is referring to when she proposes, in *Bodies That Matter*:

a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effects of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter. That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense. (1993: 10–11)

There are five closely connected aspects to this 'reformulation of the materiality of bodies' (1993: 2). First, in much the same way that Nietzsche (1956) could claim that meaning is a manifestation of power, Butler proposes that the body must be understood as 'the effect of a dynamic of power' (1993: 2). Second, the reiteration of discourses, performances and narratives of – and the repeated confirmation of relations of value regarding – the body, and their strategic deployment across social and cultural fields, effectively work to make bodies potentially visible and recognisable as coherent sets of forms, categories and meanings. Third, this recognition of the body is the first step in an ongoing process that leads to the production of a subject, and the discursive practices of identification. Fourth, the association of bodily exemplars and typologies with authorised meanings, narratives and values functions as a norm, in the Foucaultian sense; that is, it disciplines, disposes and orients

subjects. Fifth, Butler points out that this process by which subjects are formed and disposed is dependent not just on what is allowed, but also on what is denied. Referring to the quite vexed and complex linkage between subjectivity and identification, she suggests that, with regard to the movement from sex to sexuality:

The heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications. This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects', but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability ... will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which ... the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which ... is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation. (1993: 3)

This articulation of the process whereby a body eventually assumes the status of subject and takes on various identities is straightforward enough – up to a point. The problem occurs when we try to make sense of the relation between subjectivity and identity. Butler is not particularly helpful or clear on this issue. In the paragraph from which we have just quoted from *Bodies That Matter*, she is at pains to point out that a subject does not assume a bodily norm (that is, is assigned a sex), but rather the reverse – it is the process of assuming a sex that brings the subject into being (1993: 3). She then links this process with 'the question of identification, and with the discursive means by which the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses ... other identifications' (p. 3). The term 'identification' has an interesting status here. It seems to be understood, firstly, as something that takes place subsequent to becoming a subject (and being assigned a sex), and secondly, as connoting a form of agency. So I am categorised as male or female, and then certain choices are apparently available to me: my desire can be turned in the direction of the opposite sex (which is not just available, but also authorised, expected and designated as normal); or I can take the option which is no option at all, the option which is foreclosed, and turn my desire in the direction of the same sex as myself.

A number of questions need to be raised apropos of this issue. What is involved in identification? Does it refer, for instance, to a practice where the subject exercises some form of agency and effectively chooses one option over another? To what extent can we make space for this notion of identification-as-agency when Butler quite clearly insists, following Foucault, that power is always prior to and constitutive of the body-as-subject; in other words, where does identification come from, how is it produced and disposed, and what accounts for its misfirings and misperformances? To a certain extent any attempt to address these questions requires the posing of another even more complex set of questions, concerning the relation between, and the differentiation of, the concepts of the subject (and subjectivity) and identification and, most crucially, how this relation is informed by the notion of desire.

### SUBJECTS OF DESIRE

*Subjects of Desire* (1987) and *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b) constitute two very different attempts to deal with these issues. The former is sub-titled 'Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France', and Butler writes that the main task of this book is to:

comprehend retrospectively ... the formulation of desire and satisfaction in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, its philosophical celebration and reconstruction by some twentieth-century French philosophers, and the incipient moment of Hegel's dissolution in France through the deployment of desire to refute Hegel's metaphysically supported subject. (1987: 7)

Hegel formulates desire as the vehicle that effectively produces consciousness and the subject, but as Butler asks, what kind of vehicle is it (p. ix)? Desire in Hegel is understood as or stands in for reflexive consciousness, whereby consciousness seeks to know and comprehend itself through the mediation of otherness. This is how, for Hegel, the reflexive subject is formed: desire moves consciousness outside of itself to form a relation with the world-as-difference, which in turn reflects and demonstrates both the limits of the subject (I can only know myself through reference to the process of mediation and connectedness with the other), and its conditions of being (I continue to exist and know myself by way of my relation to difference). Butler's metaphor of desire-as-vehicle is particularly apt here; the Hegelian subject 'expands in the

course of its adventure through alterity; it internalises the world it desires, and expands to encompass, to be, what it initially confronts as other to itself' (p. 9). The desire of desire is, for Hegel, the subject's (continual) discovery of itself in the world, understood as a form of knowledge (pp. 24–5).

Much of *Subjects of Desire* is taken up with Hegel's reception in France, initially through Marxism (particularly Alexander Kojève) and phenomenology (Sartre); and then in what she refers to as 'contemporary French thought', encompassing psychoanalysis (Lacan) and what has been described (see Best and Kellner 1991) as postmodern theory (Foucault, Deleuze). Kojève's appropriation of Hegel's conceptualisation of desire is more of an extension than a development or critique: briefly however, we can say that one of his more important contributions to the theory of desire is the distinction he makes between ordinary biological (animal) and human desire. Human desire, for Kojève, is precisely the overcoming and transcending of biological desire and nature – it comes before and constitutes the subject. In other words, while the order of nature has no way of seeing the world except in terms of biological needs, human desire 'exhibits a structure of reflexivity ... Kojève's subject is an essentially intentional structure' (p. 67).

Hegelian and post-Hegelian (Kojève, Hypolite, Sartre) accounts of the role played by desire in the constitution of the subject emphasise its productive dimension, specifically the work it does to overcome the negativity that characterises human life. This negativity (that is, the purely biological, the animal, base identity) is effectively negated and transformed by the subject-becoming-human, which involves a thinking on and producing narratives of (and connections with) the world. Desire, from this perspective, instigates and facilitates the work of creating 'a metaphysically pleasurable fictive world, fully present and devoid of negativity' (p. 185). Even in Sartre's critique of Hegel, where instead of self-recovery the subject 'is projected endlessly, without recovery' (p. 185), it nevertheless remains 'a fictive unity projected in words' that 'knows itself in its estrangement and so remains a unitary consciousness' (p. 85). This situation changes, in France, when Hegelian thought is subjected to critiques from Lacanian psychoanalysis, and post-modern theory derived from or strongly influenced by Nietzsche. The subject is still 'understood as a projected unity, but this projection disguises and falsifies the multiplicitous disunity constitutive of experience, whether conceived as libidinal forces, the will-to-power, or the various strategies of power/discourse' (p. 185).

Lacanian psychoanalysis retains Hegel's notion of desire as having a structural role in the formation of the subject, but instead of simply serving the ends of consciousness, now desire and consciousness are connected by, and relate to one another in terms of, a necessary deception. Following Freud, Lacan posits desire as something that is sent away in order that the subject can exist; however repressed desire always returns without overtly manifesting or articulating itself, in dreams or other 'displacements, ruptures, and fissures of consciousness itself' (p. 186). For psychoanalytical theory, the notion of a reflexive, self-knowing subject is a myth: the subject is always constituted and characterised by forces that it not only cannot control, but which it cannot (and must not) know or acknowledge.

The status of desire is similarly differentiated from its place in the Hegelian narrative. Freud and Lacan understand desire as a form of libidinal energy; but whereas Freud tends to think of this energy in terms of specific unconscious wishes, Lacan opts for a less domesticated account of its workings. As Laplanche and Pontalis point out, he distinguishes desire from:

concepts with which it is often confused, such as need and demand. Need is directed towards a specific object and is satisfied by it. Demands are formulated and addressed to others; where they are still aimed at an object, this is not essential to them, since the articulated demand is essentially a demand for love. Desire appears in the rift which separates need and demand; it cannot be reduced to need since ... it is not a relation to a real object independent of the subject but a relation to phantasy; nor can it be reduced to demand, in that it seeks to impose itself without taking the language or the unconscious of the other into account, and insists upon absolute recognition from him. (1988: 483)

Whereas Hegel understands desire as a form of mediation that produces self-knowledge, Lacan foregrounds what Butler refers to as the 'opacity of desire' (1987: 186): the Oedipal Complex (which we deal with, in some detail, in Chapter 2) constitutes the subject by sending desire (for the mother) away, but this repression of desire produces the subject as lack and incomplete, and inaugurates a cycle of 'desiring for a desire' that would complete the subject. As Butler writes, 'The bar or prohibition that separates the subject from the unconscious is a negative relation which fails to mediate what it separates' (p. 187). Whereas Kojève could differentiate between biological and human forms of desire, and find in that difference the basis of a teleological narrative (progress, becoming human, rationality, knowledge, reflexivity),

Lacanian desire is unruly, undomesticated and defined by its own internal incoherence; it is split, like the subject it constitutes, between the satisfaction of biological needs and the demand for the other's love.

This idea of a split in desire is borrowed from Freud's notion of *anaclisis*, whereby the initial instinct of self-preservation (sucking the breast for nourishment) is used as a kind of prop by the sexual instincts. Jean Laplanche describes this 'propping of the drive on the function' as having two phases:

In the first phase – breast-sucking for nourishment – we are faced with a function or ... totally instinctual pattern of behavior, which ... the 'popular conception' assumes to be the model of every instinct. It is an instinctual pattern with its impetus ... an accumulation of tensions; a 'source', as well, the digestive system ... A specific object ... not the breast ... but the nourishment: milk. Finally there is a performed process or 'aim', the process of breast sucking ... Now the crucial point is that simultaneous with the feeding function's achievement of satisfaction in nourishment, a sexual process begins to appear ... the mouth is simultaneously a sex organ and an organ of the feeding function. Thus the 'propping' consists initially in that support which emergent sexuality finds in the function linked to the preservation of life. (1990: 17)

Butler quotes Lacan to the effect that 'desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting' (Lacan 1977: 287). The propping of the sexual instincts on the feeding function does not in any sense satisfy desire since, like the subject who arrives through and abides by way of a lack, the sexual instinct can only seek out substitutes for the mother's (or nurse's) breast, what Freud refers to as the process of *anaclitic identification* (Freud 1986). In psychoanalysis 'That which is thus alienated in needs ... reappears in man as desire ... The phenomenology that emerges is ... paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, even scandalous' (Lacan 1977: 286) in its differentiation from those instincts associated with self-preservation.

The last move Butler makes in her critique of Hegelian accounts and narratives of desire is made by way of reference to the strongly Nietzschean-influenced work of Deleuze and Foucault. Deleuze's main target is the notion that desire is tied to or predicated on negativity, something that is articulated not just in psychoanalytical theory (as the desire for a desire), but also in

Christian morality (desire must be defeated), and capitalist imperatives and discourses (you desire what you lack). As Butler points out, this doesn't mean that Deleuze denies the centrality of desire in human activity; on the contrary, and following Nietzsche, he insists 'there is only desire and the social, and nothing else' (Deleuze 1989: 29). Desire for Nietzsche and Deleuze is the will manifested as the affirmation of life-as-force:

The Nietzschean will is ... a multiplicitous play of forces which cannot be constrained by as dialectical unity; these forces represent currents of life, interests, desires, pleasures, and thoughts ... The Nietzschean will ... does not affirm itself apart from the context of alterity, but differs from Hegelian desire in its fundamental approach to alterity ... otherness no longer presents itself as that to be ... superseded or conceptualised; rather, difference is the condition for enjoyment, an enhanced sense of pleasure, the acceleration and intensification of the play of forces which constitute what we might call Nietzsche's version of *jouissance* ... Deleuze describes this difference between Nietzsche and Hegel: 'Nietzsche's "yes" is opposed to the dialectical "no"'. (Butler 1987: 208–9)

History, for Deleuze, can be understood as an account of will that has been gradually enslaved and turned against itself. An example is the Nietzschean narrative of how the Christian doctrine of forgiveness and self-abasement was promulgated by those who would exercise their will and dominate others; however because they were weak, they lacked the capacity to do so. Instead, they achieved their aim by subterfuge – the weak conspired to convince their opponents that strength was weakness, will arrogance, and desire a vice. This mindset produced a violence directed against the self.

Foucault offers an altogether different historical account of desire – a genealogy, in the Nietzschean sense of the term. Genealogy can be understood as an attempt to trace and locate the moments and sites when power produces and naturalises meaning or sense. Historical narratives and discourses, for instance, are produced to legitimate and authorise the claims or rights of one group at the expense of another, and to make it seem as if this is merely the way of the world, the way things are and were meant to be. The idea is that a particular substance or thing (a class faction, a race, a gender, an age group) is made to appear synonymous with an attribute (knowledge, civilisation, rationality). Nietzsche offers the example of the 'etymology of the terms for good in various languages', all of which taken together:

lead us back to the same conceptual transformation. The basic concept is always noble in the hierarchical, class sense, and from this has developed, by historical necessity, the concept of good embracing nobility of mind, spiritual distinction. This development is strictly parallel to that other which eventually converted the notions common, plebian, base into the notion bad. (1956: 162)

Genealogy is opposed, then, to official or traditional history that performs the work of naturalising power; and the work of history to which Foucault gives his attention is that of ‘the cultural construction of desire’ (Butler 1987: 215). The main difference between Foucault’s approach and that of the Hegelian tradition (and even psychoanalysis) is that, for Foucault, desire is first and foremost a name with a history – in other words, its status is fundamentally discursive. More specifically, Foucault reverses the logic of Hegelian and psychoanalytic accounts of desire that situate it as prior to, and largely constitutive of, culture. We have seen that for Hegel desire facilitates reflexivity and mediates the world, bringing the subject into being. In Freud’s work, the law barring incestuous desire is the path that both anchors the subject while splitting it by way of repression: as with the Hegelian tradition, the relationship between desire and sublimation is the mechanism, for Freud, by which civilisation supersedes the biological and instinctual. Similarly for Lacan, what Butler refers to as the ‘juridical model of power’ posits ‘a true desire prior to repression, a phenomenon that would, according to Foucault, announce an “outside” to discourse’ (1987: 221). Foucault, however, insists that the concept of desire is something that is only intelligible within, and produced by, discursive practices and formations; in other words, power precedes both desire and the subject.

Moreover there is a great deal at stake, for various formations of power, in being able to define, explain and deploy the concept of desire as a form of truth or an aspect of knowledge. As a privileged form of truth, desire authorises socio-cultural narratives and explanations; provides the basis for the categorisation of subjects and their bodies; and is identified as that which must be either embraced, affirmed, negated or negotiated if the subject is to achieve self-knowledge, salvation, mental health, bodily pleasure or control and a variety of other objectives. The body of the subject is not so much shaped or brought into being by desire; rather, it is a palimpsest that records and re-records the imposed truths of power. As Butler writes:

Foucault's critique of the discourse on desire, on the figure of the 'subjects of desire', does well to remind us that desire is a name that not only accounts for an experience, but determines that experience as well, that the subject of desire may well be a fiction useful to a variety of regulatory strategies ... If the history of desire must be told in terms of the history of bodies, then it becomes necessary how that history encodes itself in these most immediate phenomena. (1987: 238)

*Subjects of Desire* is a book about Hegelian narratives and accounts of desire that ends on a very Nietzschean note: desire is posited as an element at play in the workings of power, specifically in terms of its role in the production of, and its relation to, the notions of subjectivity and identity.

## SUBJECTION

After *Subjects of Desire*, Butler's most sustained and developed attempt to explain and identify what is at stake in this imbrication of desire, power, subjectivity and identity is to be found in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b). It is written largely from a Nietzschean and Foucaultian theoretical perspective, but it also seeks to build, or perhaps maintain, a bridge with the Freudian and Lacanian insights discussed in *Subjects of Desire* (and elaborated upon in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*).

Butler (1997b) refers to the situation where the subject is not only constituted through and dominated by, but also remains necessarily tied to and reliant on, the practices and discourses of power, as a form of 'subjection'. The point of this term is that it picks up on both sets of the aforementioned operations, and refuses the idea that the subject and any form of agency are not to some extent mediated by or negotiated through power and its various techniques (discourses, norms, forms of surveillance). Butler points out that power is thought of as something that is 'done to us', and which we seek to escape from or avoid:

But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are ... Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency. (1997b: 2)

The issue that Butler identifies as the possible bridge between Foucault and psychoanalytical theory is the role of the psyche in the process. For Foucault subjects are brought into being by fitting into and gaining recognition in, and performing congruently with regard to, a discursive grid of intelligibility made up of normative categories, descriptions and narratives. Their place within this discursive space is maintained via techniques and operations of discipline and surveillance. The French historiographer and cultural theorist Michel de Certeau has written about how in a text such as *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Foucault produces a Freudian story of the ‘vampirisation’ of Enlightenment discourses (rationality, reason, progress, the teleological drive of human knowledge) by the apparatuses, techniques and mechanisms that provide the impetus for the development of ‘penitential, educational and medical control at the beginning of the nineteenth century’ (1988: 45). The relation between Enlightenment discourse and politics is not to be expressed as a dichotomy, but as a form of colonization – disciplinary procedures take over the Enlightenment project, riding on the back of the ideology of revolution.

There are a number of aspects to Foucault’s work on disciplinary procedures – ‘This detective story about a substituted body’ (Certeau 1988: 46) – that are of particular interest here. Although these procedures inhabit and feed off Enlightenment ideologies, they appear to have no discursive place of their own. Techniques spread themselves throughout social space to the extent that they, and not the contending ideologies of sovereignty or the revolution, triumph. Why do these disciplinary techniques ‘win out’ in the end? Certeau suggests that via the introduction of ‘a cellular space of the same type for everyone (schoolboys, soldiers, workers, criminals or the ill) ... in order to make of it a tool capable of disciplining ... and “treating” any human group whatsoever’ (1988: 46). What we have here is a set of techniques of observation, regulation and control that will culminate in what, for Foucault, is our contemporary system of power.

In works such as *The Order of Things* (1973) and *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) Foucault demonstrates how these procedures feed back into, and are eventually articulated within and legitimated by, a variety of official discourses (‘the human sciences’) and ‘optical and panoptical procedures which increasingly multiply ... and reproduce themselves little by little throughout all the strata of society’ (Certeau 1988: 47). However what is

## 22 UNDERSTANDING JUDITH BUTLER

largely missing from Foucault's accounts of disciplinarity and normalisation is a technical explanation of:

how the subject is formed in submission. Not only does the entire domain of the psyche remain largely unremarked in his theory, but power in this double valence of subordinating and producing remains unexplored. Thus, if submission is a condition of subjection, it makes sense to ask: What is the psychic form that power takes? Such a project requires thinking the theory of power together with a theory of the psyche ... this present inquiry seeks to explore the provisional perspectives from which each theory illuminates the other. (Butler 1997: 2–3)

The notion of the psyche playing a central role in the process of subjection is complicated by the theoretical problem of how it is able to perform this function, given that a psyche presumes (and requires) a subject in the first place. Butler points, by way of example, to the influential (1956) Nietzschean idea of consciousness turning – or being turned – back upon itself: consciousness confronts the other, which manifests itself as both a threat and an accusation, and inaugurates a psychic phenomenon of bad conscience whereby the subject accepts the authority of the other and directs violence against itself (in the form of guilt). This theory forms the basis of Louis Althusser's notion of the subject being interpellated into existence. In his influential essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser argues that institutions, texts and discourses recruit:

subjects among the individuals ... or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects ... by interpellation or hailing ... which can be imagined among the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him. (1977: 163)

The analogy is straightforward enough: in Althusser's example it is a policeman shouting to someone in the street, but it could be a school teacher talking to a student in a classroom, or even a bureaucratic form that has to be filled out. When any authority addresses us and gets a response, in that moment the departure point or context of the encounter is the right of the authority figure to categorise, and the validity of the categorisation that is provided. This formulation is problematical to some extent, because it appears

to leave out the possibility of any form of agency or disobedience: as Butler points out ‘The law might not only be refused ... it might also be ruptured’ and its ‘monotheistic force’ called into question (1993: 122). Althusser’s point, however, is that it does not matter so much whether a subject ‘believes’ in authority and its self-narratives (the state knows best, the police are working in your interest, you should work harder, etc.). He refers to Pascal’s famous dictum that if you ‘Kneel down, move your lips in prayer ... you will believe’ (1977: 158). What this means is that it is the ritual of call and response that in fact produces compliant subjects. Put simply, by acting as if we believe, we end up believing in what we act.

Nietzschean-influenced theories of subjection, within which Foucault’s and Althusser’s work can be grouped, all fail to account, however, for the problem of the psyche without a subject. Butler’s response is to think of their accounts as tropological; that is to say, Foucault’s normalisation, Nietzsche’s bad conscience and Althusser’s interpellation are read as theoretical mechanism that ‘facilitates ... [an] explanation but also marks its limits’ (1997b: 4). This is what motivates Butler’s interest in pursuing a connection with psychoanalysis. The idea of the subject as the product of a relation of parts and process (involving formation and subordination), that are both linear and simultaneous with regard to one another, more or less demands a mechanism that is congruent with the notions of repression and the unconscious:

The Foucaultian postulation of subjection as the simultaneous subordination and forming of the subject assumes a specific psychoanalytical valence when we consider that no subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent ... Although the dependency of the child is not political subordination in any usual sense, the formation of primary passion in dependency renders the child vulnerable to subordination and exploitation ... Moreover, this situation of primary dependence conditions the political formation and regulation of subjects and becomes the means of their subjection. (1997b: 7)

The notion of a ‘passionate attachment’ is what sets the psychoanalytical narrative of subjection in train, but it is an attachment that is always problematical and potentially scandalous; at best it is a point of tension, and at worst a scene of desire that threatens to unravel the subject. Just as with the process of anaclysis, where at a specific bodily level the site of attachment (literally, the nipple or breast as origin of the supply of milk) is transformed

into something more than the instinctual, so the condition of the child's relation to its main carer (it need not be a parent) is initially one of necessity and survival. If the child is to persist it must become dependent, but the move from dependency to love is simultaneously dealt a violence that effectively splits the subject. This is what is meant, in the technical sense, by the notion of foreclosure: that which is constitutive of the subject is sent away and can only reappear to trigger the dissolution of the subject. As Butler points out, this is the real logic and condition of subjection, since 'To desire the condition of one's own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself' (1997b: 9).

How does Butler tie foreclosure to the Foucaultian processes of regulation, discipline and normalisation; or again, how are these practices and techniques incorporated by the subject at the level of the psyche? Psychoanalytical accounts refer to the internal workings of the subject (the psyche), while Foucault demonstrates how socio-cultural objectivities – spaces and architecture, discourses, the repetition of mechanisms of surveillance – produce compliant and docile (and productive) subjects-as-bodies. Butler argues that rather than considering these components as a relation of linearity – the psyche facilitating regulation and normalisation, or the other way around – it is more useful to consider them as two sides of the operation of power. As she writes:

to the extent that norms operate as psychic phenomena, restricting and producing desire, they also govern the formation of the subject and circumscribe the domain of the livable sociality. The psychic operation of the norm offers a more insidious route for regulatory power than explicit coercion, one whose success allows its tacit operation within the social. (1997b: 21)

This imbrication of the psyche with mechanisms of discipline not only offers a technical explanation as to how the imperatives and logics – and violence – of power are internalised; it also goes some way to getting around the anti-historical bent of psychoanalysis; and perhaps even more importantly it provides something of an alternative to the structural closure of psychoanalytic accounts of the subject, by grounding it in social and historical processes and practices. What this means is that a gap is opened up between the rules and norms through which the subject is both constituted and disposed, and the discursive operation which produces the illusion of the universality and naturalisation of those norms. Moreover, Foucault maintains that what

power produces is not necessarily in line with its aims, and indeed that it contains within it the seeds of its own vulnerability. While any sense of agency or political resistance can only take place within the terms of power, those terms are always predicated on a set of categories that are outside, and antithetical to, what is authorised and prescribed as the normal, healthy, and the recognisably human:

being psychic, the norm does not merely reinstate social power, it becomes formative and vulnerable in highly specific ways. The social categorizations that establish the vulnerability of the subject ... are themselves vulnerable to psychic and historical change. This view counters an understanding of psychic or linguistic normativity ... that is prior to the social ... Just as the subject is derived from conditions of power that precede it, so the psychic operation of the norm is derived ... from prior social operations. (Butler 1997b: 21)

Exactly the same may be said of desire: it is not only regulated and disposed by power, but it is also facilitated by it, in ways quite contrary to normative logics and narratives. As Butler points out, through the act of prohibition the law inadvertently eroticises what it bars: at the moment that a particular path is denied me, it becomes 'the focus of desire' (1997b: 103). This is why, for Lacanian psychoanalysis, the prohibition against incest always works contrary to its intentions: it takes a potential relationship that has no intrinsic erotic or sexual potential on its own, and invests it with the status of a structural universality upon which society and culture are founded. So the universality of the law of incest prohibition is characterised by this mechanistic arbitrariness that undermines its own logic. The rule forecloses incestuous relations, but this only makes the idea of unthinkable incest all the more desirable. A good example of this can be seen in Pasolini's film *Oedipus Rex*, where the sexual tension and desire between the two main characters patently intensifies as the signs of the truth of their relationship proliferate. Oedipus and Jocasta act as if incest is foreclosed and unthinkable, but the fact of its foreclosure increases their desire to commit incest.

## IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

To this point we have dealt with most of the theoretical issues we identified from *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* – the formation of the body as

a culturally intelligible site and text, the status of desire and its relation to subjectivity, and the processes whereby the subject is simultaneously formed through and subjected to the regulatory regimes of power. What remains is the relation between subjectivity and the notion of identity (and by extension, identification), and the two sets of questions we posed earlier in this chapter: first, how can we distinguish identity from subjectivity; and second, to what extent can identity be said to facilitate or involve a sense of identification-as-agency?

Butler offers the clearest account of how she understands the first issue in the 'Introduction' to *The Psychic Life of Power*, where she seeks to explain the difference between the subject and the individual human body-as-identity. She writes that:

The 'subject' is sometimes bandied about as if it were interchangeable with 'the person' or 'the individual'. The genealogy of the subject ... however, suggests that the subject, rather than being identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, as structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a 'site') ... No individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected. (1997b: 10–11)

Subjection, from this perspective, is understood as having a structural or architectural function: it both allows subjects to be (recognised); and provides them with an entry to, and a narrational trajectory within, the wider socio-cultural field.

For Butler the central form of identity is sexual identity: in order to preserve this identity, identification must be in accordance with the incest prohibition and the dictates of heteronormativity (this issue will be dealt with in detail in the following chapter). Identification, then, is not so much a kind of agency as a choice where there is no choice; the subject is designated by or called names (girl, child, daughter), and forms of attachment, and eventually, desire, must be recognisably and commensurably normal. Identification is also, crucially, about non-identification, both at the level of the incest prohibition and by extension, the prescribed narratives of sexuality. As Butler writes:

It seems clear that the positions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' ... are established in part through prohibitions which demand the loss of certain sexual attachments, and demand as well that these losses not be avowed, and not be grieved ... The oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been

accomplished, that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual has been enforced (a distinction which, after all, has no necessity); in this sense, the prohibition on incest presupposes the prohibition on homosexuality, for it presumes the heterosexualization of desire. (1997b: 135)

More generally, and across a variety of cultural fields, the subject both ‘chooses’ and achieves further identities. This involves developing literacy with regard to the requirements (discourses, performances, forms of value, bodily hexis) associated with each category and site of identity, and ensuring that the choices made are in keeping with normative values. We can think here of the process Bourdieu identifies whereby the habitus – which he refers to as ‘history naturalized’ – ensures that the choices made and values identified with are disposed, but that the fact of disposition is displaced to the level of the unconscious; in other words, disposition and necessity are misrecognised as free will or choice (Bourdieu 2000). For Bourdieu, cultural practices and choices are always the result of a coming together of the habitus and specific cultural fields and contexts. As people pass through various cultural fields and institutions, and come under their influence, they are disposed to regard those values, discourses, ideals and ways of doing things as natural and, to some extent, universal. As Butler writes ‘This belief derives ... from the ideas of the individual concerned, i.e. from him as a subject with a consciousness which contains the ideas of his belief. In this way the ... attitude of the subject concerned naturally follows’ (1997b: 210–11).

Bourdieu not only demonstrates ‘how norms become embodied’, he also ‘offers a promising account of the way in which non-intentional and non-deliberate incorporations of norms take place’ (Butler 1997b: 142). His analysis of the ongoing relation between subjects, objective structures, and time and place demonstrates that practices are explicable neither in terms of the institutional logics, narratives, rules, values, discourses and ideologies of a field (the objective conditions of practice), nor in terms of individual, unmediated decision making. The habitus is made up of a number of dispositions, modes of operation, inclinations, values and rationales. These principles:

generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor. (Bourdieu 1990: 53)

Practices are the result, then, of the conjuncture – always slightly ‘out of synch’ – between the formative dispositions of the habitus, and the objective conditions that are produced out of these conjunctures. Butler characterises this process as a ‘vector of temporalities’ (2005: 35): quite simply, the time of the objectivities of any cultural field, and of the wider field and operations of power, is never synchronous with the time of any subject. Further, no subject is ever entirely in time with another, regardless of the levels or felicities of recognition, similarities of place, or a closely shared habitus. This is partly because the places that a subject occupies within a field or fields are never entirely substitutable with, or analogous to, another: the extent to which each subject is out of synch with regard to the field will vary from place to place, and consequently from subject to subject. As a corollary, there are also the questions of the extent to which some subjects are able to anticipate when and where a field is going, or which norms are in the process of being modified, and what is at stake in this modification and for whom, and what are the best ways of profiting from it? The gap between habitus and field can be productive to the extent that their lack of synchronicity can be the basis for their unravelling; in other words, where two strongly naturalised systems or logics mutually refute one another, a subject’s ‘unconscious belief’ must be challenged on some level.

The disjunction between the life of the subject and the socio-cultural order of things is captured in Foucault’s assertion that ‘discourse is not your life, its time is not yours’ (Burchill et al. 1991: 72). The subject is not only always out of time, however, but also affectively disconnected from, if not entirely irrelevant to, those orders of discourse (and the circulation of power) that purport to address the subject. As Foucault makes clear, a subject is always and necessarily alienated from the conditions that make being possible:

Must I suppose that, in my discourse, it is not my own survival which is at stake? And that, by speaking, I do not exorcise my death, but establish it ... that I yield my utterance to an outside which is so indifferent to my life, so neutral, that it knows no difference between my life and my death? (Burchill et al. 1991: 71)

## CONCLUSION

In a sense the subject is like the fabled man from the country in Kafka’s *The Trial*, who continually seeks, but is refused admittance to, a door through

which he will stand before the law, only to hear, 'at the end of his strength', that 'No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it' (Kafka 1976: 237). His life is exhausted, metaphorically and literally, but at the same time it is the imperative to 'attain the law' that gives his life coherence, purpose, focus and direction. As Butler puts it, the norms that 'sustain my life in its intelligibility' both 'interrupt the time of my living' and are 'indifferent to me, to my life and my death', but 'Paradoxically, it is ... this disorientation ... this instance of an indifference ... that nevertheless sustains my living' (2005: 35). In the next chapter we will look at how these processes and issues are addressed in, and to some extent refracted by, Butler's various engagements with feminist theory.

#### **FURTHER READING**

---

- Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.  
Foucault, M. (2005) *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. New York: Picador.  
Nietzsche, F. (1956) *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.