

# On Performative Subjectivity

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Judith Butler argues that sex is not a biologically given on which gender is built, but rather itself a regulatory ideal materialised in the body through normatively given reiterative practices. She distances herself from a constructivist position that would have to suppose a subject “doing” the construction, or a position that would have to see the constituted subject as the product of a deterministic process. Instead, she suggests that recognising that there are conditions for the emergence of the subject neither requires a “subject” before the constitution of a subject, nor the foreclosure of agency by making the subject the product and puppet of socio-cultural process. Butler hereby dissociates from positions that would discount the constructed subject as either an artificial construct hiding the “real” subject lying underneath, or those that would discount the constructed subject as genuine agent. Butler marks the reality of the subject, but the subject as made possible through certain processes and continuously constituted through citationality.

For Butler argues that the materialisation of sex in the body is never fully realised because “sex” is always already gendered. Gender is not merely “the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a judicial conception)” but it also designates “the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (GT: 30). Nonetheless, to claim that the sexed body is a construct does not imply a conclusion that there is a true, unconstructed, singular self or that we self-sufficiently author our own

counter-construction. There is no “I” or “we” who precedes construction because it is by subjecting ourselves to cultural norms that allows us the access to the “differentiating relations by which the speaking subjects come into being” (B: 75). “Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the “I” neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves” (Ibid.). The activity of gendering is not “a human act or expression, a willful appropriation ... it is the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible... In this sense, the matrix of gender relation is prior to the emergence of “the human” (Ibid.) Butler argues that even the psyche does not escape this logic, for she sees the (Lacanian) “ascension” to the symbolic law as a “*citing* of the law”. Thus “the law is no longer given in a fixed form *prior* to its citation, but is produced through citation as that which precedes and exceeds the mortal approximations enacted by the subject” (79-80). This does not mean that culture simply originates the subject, rather the body and the subject are merely *effects* of sociality and its normalising power:

construction is neither a subject nor its act, but a process of reiteration by which both subjects and “acts” come to appear at all. There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting (ritual) that is power in its persistence and instability ...[C]onstruction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects (B: 76-7).

Therefore, construction is not a stable determinism either, rather it is the repetition of norms that precedes the emergence of the subject and initiates the subject into the symbolic order. Cultural norms then produce subjectivity in the form of cultural intelligibility by following the logic of reiteration as articulated by Derrida:

readability ... is possible on *this* occasion only if *another* repetition is always possible, up to and including, a repetition in the absolute absence of the 'living presence' of an empirically determinable addressee. It must be capable of doing without their presence, of functioning without them (UD: 9)

Butler transposes this logic into cultural field and arrives at a notion of signification that resides neither in culture nor the subject but one that is perpetually re-produced through power relation. While culture sustains its normative power through the subject's embodiment of its signs the subject, in turn, must cite and mime the very norms that created its intelligibility in the first place in order to remain culturally and socially viable. If norms are understood to be regulatory ideals, and if the subject's intelligibility is dependent on emulating extant norms, then identification with or accession to these norms actually compels bodies to act, gesture and behave in ways that constantly strive to embody the fantasy of a coherent and 'natural' identity core. Thus, the process of signification occurs through the constant performative reiteration of norms, and this reiteration actually materializes a set of effects on the body. Or, more precisely, the intelligible body is a materialization or "a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, ....yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities... that escapes or exceeds the norm. This instability is the "deconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition" that "put the consolidation of norms into a potentially productive crisis" (B: 77).

By showing the dependency of construction on repetition Butler is able to theorise identity as a performative process that produces subjectivity. This repetition is not simply a performance by a subject but a performativity that constitutes a subject and

simultaneously produces conflicting subjectivities that contest originary and stable identity categories. Since agency here lies in performativity the subjects are constantly reproduced through repetition and thus are never fully constituted. There is neither a prior intention nor a “performer” of performativity (B: 79). Identity is not chosen by the subject but instead gets produced as the subject repeats him/herself; we do not perform an identity as actors/actresses do, but instead we *become* subjects through repetition. Identity, then, is a *doing*—not *by* a subject but a performative doing that constitutes the identity it professes to be. In other words, identities does not *exist*, properly speaking, rather they *emerge* from discourse as neither foundational grounds nor fully expressed product. This provides a clearing for norms to be re-worked by the subjects who subversively transform, refuse, parody, or rupture the law of discourse, thereby reconstituting themselves. It is important to realise that subversion does not originate outside culture but is always within culture itself as socially constructed objects against which normative power is defined and subjectivity achieved. Subject-formation

requires the simultaneous production of a domain of object beings, those who are not yet “subjects,” ... who form the constitutive outside,... which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation[,] ...a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge (B: 72)

Identity categories become highly problematic sites because the subject always fails to *fully* signify because what excluded signification always returns, disrupts and defers the intended meaning. To put it differently, when I act certain ways as a student in particular contexts, other expressions are silenced, erased, hidden to myself and to others. Identity, then, is simply provisional, even an error or a mistake.

Butler's notion of performativity provides a compelling theoretical foundation that apprehends the body as always in the process of becoming and never fully materialised. The body in this sense does not exist except as textual reiteration that produces and reproduces the body as marks. As Butler writes, "there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings" (GT: 30). This means that the body is not readily intelligible, for interpretation implies a clearing, a construction of meaninglessness that constitutes interpretation itself. The fact that the body is *interpreted* proves that society writes indirectly, or more precisely, it *translates*. Marks somehow build to make signs but are not signs themselves, and identification is the body made intelligible at the expense of "meaningless" mark. Nonetheless, I find that Butler's emphasis on sociality of marks tends to gloss over marks in favour of the scenes they composed. In the end such account shrinks the notion of what a mark is, assimilating marks into texts and overlooking their 'writerly' strangeness. What needs to be done is demonstrate further the ontological instability of marks by showing how marking can exist between meaningful sign and meaningless mark. It is crucial to expose the instability of mark itself by analysing its supplementarity, in Derridean sense, as interruption and excess beyond readability, irreducible to either form or content. This will be especially relevant when dealing with the graphicization of the body, such as clothing, scarification, masking, etc. Such body certainly disqualifies as pre-discursive anatomical facticity. It exists as collective remnants of cultural marks and by herding body-marks into the category of culture makes possible the leap from recalcitrant, "meaningless" mark to the signs that the subject seems to embody. But to do so would be to endorse an ontological stability to mark by claiming that mark signifies beyond itself and finds home

in legibility. A vigilant account of marked bodies cannot afford to begin and end with overall properties of cultural intelligibility. To speak only of what must exist in spite of the literal marks against which it struggles –only of the mark as a *represented* thing – is to elide the crucial moment of darkness, when the body-mark, in all its non-linguistic opacity, confronts us as something *illegible*, is to hope that marks can deliquesce into sense. This can only take place *against* a construction of ‘nonsense’ that produces lack and makes interpretation possible. A more iconoclastic construction of the body can be pursued if we are forced to attend the ways that outlandish and partly incomprehensible mark both hinder and enable whatever readability the body, abject or otherwise, seems to tell.

### **ABBREVIATIONS:**

- GT ‘Selection from Gender Trouble’ in Welton, D. *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*. Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1998: 28-44.
- B ‘Selection from Bodies That Matter’ in Welton 1998: 71-83
- UD Reynolds, J. and Roffe, J., eds. *Understanding Derrida*. New York;London: Continuum, 2004.