

## Colin Pink

### Judith Butler – Troubling Matter.

#### Introduction

Judith Butler (born 1956) is an American lesbian feminist theorist. She studied in Europe and her ideas are strongly influenced by French feminism and post-structuralism. She utilises the genealogical approach of Michel Foucault, whereby he traces the evolution of discursive formations over time, to reveal the way they construct the objects which they are ostensibly there to study; and Jacques Derrida's deconstructive techniques for challenging established binary oppositions such as culture/nature, male/female. Butler also makes use of many ideas derived from a range of psychoanalytic thinkers, (Freud, Lacan and Kristeva), and ordinary language philosophy, e.g. J.L.Austin.

Butler is very much a syncretic thinker. She draws ideas from a wide and diverse range of thinkers and pulls them together in exciting and provocative ways (see the diagram in the Appendix for a schematic representation of the diverse sources of Butler's ideas). This syncretic approach can be a barrier to understanding her ideas; however, the very complexity of the approaches she adopts reveals and enacts one of her key points: that the formation of notions of sex, gender and what is commonly regarded as 'normal' sexuality, is the locus of a pervasive matrix of discourses which construct notions of normativity and attempt to foreclose alternative ways of being. As Butler states in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary preface to *Gender Trouble*:

Gender Trouble sought to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions.

(GT pviii)

*Gender Trouble* was written against the background of the AIDS crisis in the USA and the slow reaction of the US government to an epidemic that was initially thought only killed gays, hence the phrase 'violent presumptions'. *Gender Trouble* was one of the founding texts of what has come to be known as Queer Theory, a form of theory that radically challenges accepted notions of what is 'normal'. Queer Theory

is also a reaction against the previous identity politics of feminism and gay rights where identities such as 'woman' and 'homosexual' were adopted without much critical examination. It is these very notions of identity and how certain people and practices come to be thought of as 'natural' or 'normal' that Butler wishes to examine. Simone de Beauvoir famously stated, in *The Second Sex* (1949):

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (SS p281)

According to this view 'woman' is not a natural category but something created by culture. Subsequent feminist thinkers drew a distinction between sex, an anatomical 'fact' and gender a socially constructed identity. However, Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, challenges this distinction and claims that sex is always gender all along:

...there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along. (GT p12)

For Butler gender is something we do rather than something we are. Though we decide how to do our gender this is not a free choice since we always find ourselves in an already gendered situation. Categories such as man/woman, male/female, straight/gay are discursive constructs within what Butler terms the heterosexual matrix of power. Butler's key idea behind this assertion is her notion of the performativity of gender.

According to Butler gender is a category that is created through the performativity of discourse; the ability of certain discourses to create the objects of which they speak. J.L. Austin identified certain utterances as performative such as a marriage vow which creates a legal obligation and change of status and promises which set up certain moral obligations; Butler uses Austin's notion of performativity (refracted through Derrida's critique of Austin in 'Signature Event Context') to account for the way in which discursive practices create subjects.

Announcing at a birth 'it's a girl!' is, according to Butler, performative in this sense since it sets in motion a whole series of discursive strategies that situate the

individual in a certain pre-established nexus of power. Hence 'it's a girl!' (in Butler's terms, the 'girling' of the infant) sets in train actions that lead to: pink clothes, dresses, dolls etc, all props that encourage the subject to perform their gender identity and establish norms that ultimately lead to the heterosexualist 'I do' of the marriage vows.

It is important to realise that the performativity of gender is not a one off act that takes place at birth but a constantly reiterated phenomenon:

...performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act', but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. What will, I hope, become clear in what follows is that the regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialise the body's sex, to materialise sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative. (BTM p2)

By stressing the performativity of gender Butler seeks to expose the constructed nature of sex/gender norms and open up a space within which these norms, such as heterosexuality, can be challenged. Her work is therefore designed to perform what would be characterised in Foucauldian terms as a reverse discourse on sex.

## **Interpellation**

Butler also employs Louis Althusser's notion of Interpellation to talk in terms of the medical interpellation of gender that takes place immediately the infant is shifted from an 'it' to a he or she. Althusser introduced the concept of interpellation (in his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses') as a way of illustrating how an individual comes to assume a subject position within the state. Althusser introduces his notion of interpellation through an example of a man walking along the street who is hailed by a policeman, an authority figure from the state, who shouts: 'Hey, you.' The man turns around, and in turning he acknowledges his subject position as a person subject to the authority of the state. By the interpellation of gender Butler means that the individual is subjected to a particular sexed and gendered role within society. Unlike Althusser's notion of interpellation there is no necessity to acknowledge the interpellation for it to work. We are all interpellated in multiple ways, regardless of whether we acknowledge the 'hailing' or whether we are even aware of it.

In a late capitalist state individuals are often interpellated into subject positions through the use of technology. Our mobile phones and chip and PIN cards are ways of tracing our movements and inscribe us within the consumer matrix. Anyone who has recently visited the US will have been forced to undergo a retinal scan and fingerprinting and whereby be interpellated into the criminological database of the USA as a foreign body, a potential threat to the US body politic, who must be identified and tracked. As modern states become increasingly paranoid more and more sophisticated and industrialised methods for interpellating individuals as subjects of state control are being introduced. For instance the UK government plans to introduce identity cards that will contain key information about each individual on a computer chip.

### **Performative language and performativity of gender.**

Butler derives her ideas on the performativity of gender from the notion of the performativity of language derived from the Ordinary Language philosophy of J.L.Austin.

Austin, in a series of articles and lectures during the 1950s, sought to redirect philosophical attention away from what he termed the fetish for the distinctions true/false and fact/value. Austin drew attention to the fact that, in addition to being used to make statements about the world, language is also used to actually do things (hence the title of his book *How To Do Things With Words*). Words that do things he categorised as *performative* and words that simply state things he termed *constative*. Whereas constative expressions were characterised as tending to be true or false, this was irrelevant to performatives, which in Austin's terms would either be happy or unhappy, felicitous or infelicitous depending on whether they succeeded in performing a certain act or not. Much of Austin's lectures were concerned with identifying the various infelicities that beset performatives.

For example, if someone undertakes the marriage vows but is already married or the person conducting the ceremony is not authorised to perform marriages or they attempt to marry someone/thing that is prohibited (a member of the same sex, an animal, an inanimate object) then they do not succeed in actually getting married and the performative 'I do' in answer to the marriage vows is infelicitous. Similarly, if any passing person walks up to a ship, smashes a bottle of bubbly over its hull and pronounces 'I name this ship The Green Parrot' they have

not actually succeeded in officially naming the ship because they were not the dignitary chosen to perform that role.

Notice that performatives are able to do things by virtue of a whole range of conventions accepted in a given society for carrying out that particular function. Performatives therefore incorporate a great range of societal norms such as, for instance, that it is not acceptable to marry a person of the same sex. If some societies accept this practice and others do not then the very same performative can be felicitous in one place (or time) and infelicitous in another. The performative nature of language is therefore intimately bound up with the practices of a particular society at a particular time. As Austin states in his lecture 'Performative-Constative':

The performative must be issued in a situation appropriate in all respects for the act in question: if the speaker is not in the conditions required for its performance (and there are many such conditions) then his utterance will be, as we call it in general, 'unhappy'. (PC p14).

In his lectures, published as *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin explores in elaborate detail his distinction between performative and constative utterances. Austin's lectures are highly self-deconstructive in the sense that the further he delves into his distinction, and the more subtle his analysis becomes, the clearer it is that the initial binary distinction between performative/constative breaks down as each category becomes permeated with features previously thought characteristic of the other. Austin discovers that performatives also depend on certain facts being the case and constatives are vulnerable to certain infelicities (such as sincerity/insincerity) that plague performatives. As Austin says:

Now let us consider where we stand for a moment: beginning with the supposed contrast between performative and constative utterances, we found sufficient indications that unhappiness nevertheless seems to characterize both kinds of utterance, not merely the performative; and that the requirement of conforming or bearing some relation to the facts, different in different cases, seems to characterise performatives, in addition to the requirement that they should be happy, similarly to the way which is characteristic of supposed constatives. (HT p91)

In addition certain utterances can be performative or constative on different occasions and in different circumstances. Take, for example, the simple utterance:

'The Doberman is hungry.'

This could be intended as a simple statement of fact, in which case it might be true or false that the Doberman is hungry and would be constative. However, in uttering the statement I could be threatening someone or warning them to beware of the dog in which case it would be performative and be happy or unhappy depending on whether I succeeded in threatening or warning on this occasion. And there are many other ways of interpreting this utterance.

Towards the end of *How To Do Things With Words* Austin asks 'What then finally is left of the distinction of the performative and constative utterance?' (HT p145). Austin utilises a distinction between the locutionary content of an utterance (what is said), the illocutionary force of the utterance (what we are doing in uttering what is said), and the perlocutionary effect of the utterance (the effect of uttering it) and he concludes that:

With the constative utterance, we abstract from the illocutionary (let alone the perlocutionary) aspects of the speech act, and we concentrate on the locutionary: moreover, we use an over-simplified notion of correspondence with the facts – oversimplified because essentially it brings in the illocutionary aspect. This is the ideal of what would be right to say in all circumstances, for any purpose, to any audience, &c. Perhaps it is sometimes realised.

With the performative utterance, we attend as much as possible to the illocutionary force of the utterance, and abstract from the dimension of correspondence with facts. (HT p145-146)

A consequence of this is that to interpret an utterance as either constative or performative is always to leave something out. An interpretation by focussing on a particular aspect of language use (stating facts, giving commands, making obligations etc) always has in-built its exclusions. If, as Austin states earlier in *How To Do Things With Words* (p52), 'We must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued . . . the total speech act in the total speech situation' then utterances will always be underdetermined because the total speech act can never be fully defined<sup>1</sup> since one definition inherently excludes some aspects of the total speech act in the total speech situation. Looked at in this way the performative aspects of a constative utterance, considered as such, stand as the excluded but necessary *supplement* to the constative utterance. The implications of Austin's theory are, therefore, more deconstructive than has traditionally been perceived in Anglo-American philosophy. It is for this reason that Derrida characterises Austin's work as '... an analysis that is patient, open, aporetic, in constant transformation, often more fruitful in the recognition of its impasses than in its positions' (SEC p99)

In the course of his analysis of the performative use of words Austin excludes certain uses of speech as being 'not serious' and 'not full normal' uses.' (HT p104). According to Austin:

a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. (HT p22)

Derrida believes Austin excludes these utterances because he wants to ground speech acts in the intentions of the speaker. In the case of a stage utterance the actor is not expressing his own personal intentions but 'representing' the intentions of the 'character' or the author of the work; in this sense we are at a remove from the originating source of the utterance.

Derrida, in his reading of Austin in his lecture 'Signature Event Context', characteristically homes in on Austin's exclusion of the 'not serious'. Derrida believes that we are already and always at a remove from the intentions of the speaker regardless of whether the originating speaker stands before you or their utterance is transmitted to you in some other way. One always has to interpret the intentions of the speaker and this interpretation will be partially determined by many different contextual aspects. Therefore what Austin characterises as parasitic upon normal utterances is characteristic, for Derrida, of all utterances.<sup>2</sup> According to Derrida:

. . . is not what Austin excludes as anomalous, exceptional, "non-serious", that is, *citation* (on the stage, in a poem, or in a soliloquy), the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather, a general iterability – without which there would not even be a "successful" performative? Such that – a paradoxical, but inevitable consequence – a successful performative is necessarily an "impure" performative, to use the word that Austin will employ later or when he recognises that there is no "pure" performative. (SEC p103)

Derrida criticises Austin's work as yet another example of the metaphysics of presence. Despite Austin's deep awareness of the many 'infelicities' to which the use of language is prone Derrida thinks Austin still clings to the ideal of the totally transparent, immediate, self-present and unambiguous communication.

Derrida wants to emphasize that these 'infelicities' of language are not some accidental hazard to which language is unfortunately liable but a structurally constitutive feature of language's ability to function at all.

For language to work it must be iterable, that is language must be repeatable, words have to have more than one occasion of use, otherwise they would not be able to function as language<sup>3</sup>. According to Derrida another key feature of language is its citationality:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written . . . can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any centre of absolute anchoring. This citationality, duplication, or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is not an accident or anomaly, but is that (normal-abnormal) without which a mark could no longer even have a so-called normal functioning. (SEC p97)

Words can always be cited, quoted, used in contexts divorced from the original use; language is in this sense portable. In fact all use of language is already a citation of previous language for which there is no determinable originary point but only an endless citational chain.

According to Derrida language must be repeatable (iterable) and quotable (citational). Utterances can be repeated (iterated) in numerous different contexts and every utterance can be quoted (cited) in a different context to that in which it was originally made. Therefore any attempt to bind utterances to particular contexts is bound to fail. In addition a given context can never be fully determined. There is never a plenitude of context; it is always open to re-interpretation, citation and reiteration. Butler sums up Derrida's argument as follows:

In "Signature Event Context" Derrida argues that the binding power that Austin attributes to the speaker's intention in such illocutionary acts is more properly attributable to a citational force of the speaking, the iterability that establishes the authority of the speech act, but which establishes the non-singular character of that act. In this sense, every "act" is an echo or citational chain, and it is its citationality that constitutes its performative force. (BTM p282 n5)

Performativity for Butler gets its power from its iterability and its citationality. In other words performativity is not a once and for all thing but a constant re-enactment, an

iteration, of the performative moment. It is through its constant iteration that it achieves its affects of constituting that which it names.

Feminity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no “one” who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a “one”, to become viable as a “one”, where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms. (BTM p232)

Performativity gets its power or authority from its citationality.

. . . a performative “works” to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilised. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force. (BTM p227)

The performative always operates on the basis of citing an already established authority. In this way it disguises its very performativity by appearing to be constative, that is merely restating (citing) something that already obtains. Performativity is an ontological process. Through the authority of its citationality and its insidious iterability it brings into being the entities it names<sup>4</sup>.

It is hard to talk about something unless there already exist or can be invented the linguistic distinctions that enable one to isolate that about which one talks. Language divides up the world (into, for instance, categories such as male/female) and when we use language it also uses us because our thoughts and our discourse are naturally led along the lines of the categories already in place in our language. In other words there is no presuppositionless use of language and the presuppositions are already always built into the very language that we use. In this way language does not just reflect the world (“as it is”) but constructs the world that we can talk about. It is because of this that radical feminists, such as Butler, want to expose the constructed basis of our discourse and challenge the traditional binary categories such as sex (male/female) and gender (masculine/feminine) that construct the norms for discourse.

Judith Butler, in her work on gender in books such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, is concerned not just to theorise gender but also to identify strategies for challenging gender norms. These norms enforce what Butler characterises, in *Gender Trouble*, as the ‘compulsory order of sex/gender/desire’ (GT

p9) whereby the materiality of sex determines gender which in turn produces desire. Hence the dominant heterosexualist norm implies, for example, that to be born female produces femininity which leads to desire for males.

Since, according to Butler, we all perform our gender by sticking to the unwritten rules of behaviour our culture fosters Butler has focused on parodic performances, such as Drag, that challenge, disrupt or subvert the normative gender performance and thereby throws into focus the constructedness of gender norms.

What is “performed” in drag is, of course, *the sign* of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body that it figures, but that cannot be read without it. (BTM p237)

...drag imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing gender itself to be an imitation. (PLP p145)

It is relatively easy for people to accept a division between gender and sex; to imagine a masculine female or a feminine man but Butler’s critique goes much further than that. In particular, as developed in her later book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler questions the materiality of sex as a given independent of any discourse:

Through what regulatory norms is sex itself materialised? And how is it that treating the materiality of sex as a given presupposes and consolidates the normative conditions of its own emergence? (BTM p10)

Is Butler, then, ignorant of the evidence of anatomy? As she herself comments: ‘Couldn’t someone simply take me aside?’ (BTM x). But, as Salih points out in her book on Butler:

Butler is not refuting the “existence” of matter, but she insists that matter can have no status outside a discourse that is always constitutive, always interpellative, always performative. (JB p80)

In other words the choice of the genitals as especially significant in differentiating between infants as opposed to other bodily differences, such as say weight, length, size of head, shape of ears etc., shows how powerfully the discourse of sex determines how we perceive bodies and constitute subjects that are divided up into certain categories that bring with them a highly regulated set of behavioural expectations and norms.

Feminity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no “one” who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a “one”, to become viable as a “one”, where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms. (BTM p232)

A good illustration of Butler’s point is the way in which persons born who are intersex<sup>5</sup>, that is do not have a determinate male or female sex, have to be assigned one or the other of the binary poles of male/female in order for them to be accepted as a subject in our society. The dominant discursive formations around sex make it unthinkable that a person should be neither male nor female. Even though such persons exist they have to perform a particular gender thereby occluding their inconveniently ‘anomalous’ anatomy.

For Butler there is no ‘natural’, pre-discursive, body because the very idea of the ‘natural’ is itself a discursive construct. In her hands the sex/gender distinction collapses because there is no sex that is not already gendered. ‘gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes’ (GT p33). In other words gender is not a thing but a process. What appears to be natural is, in Butler’s terms, the congealed residue (sedimentation) of a whole complex array of performative acts. Ultimately there are only acts not identities; but our acts are not freely chosen but conform to the predominant norms or ‘regulatory practices of gender coherence’ (GT p33). This does not mean that Butler sees gender as completely determined; she believes that the dominant norms can be contested in a variety of ways. And Butler sees the ‘very complexity of the discursive map that constructs gender’ as opening out possibilities for change. As Butler says:

If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing. (GT p43)

See for instance the photograph in the appendix of two lesbian clubbers. They are clearly parodying the stereotypes of feminity and masculinity and the lesbian stereotypes of butch/femme. By wearing a tutu, a very ‘feminine’ garment designed by men to show off women’s bodies and a leather harness associated with the ultra-masculine gay BDSM sub-culture and sporting severe ‘masculine’ haircuts they short-circuit the masculine/feminine dichotomy.

For Butler we are all subjects-in-process; she refers approvingly to Nietzsche, quoting (from *On the Genealogy of Morals*): ‘there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything’ (quoted in GT p33). Extending this notion to the subject of gender Butler concludes: ‘There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.’ (GT p33).

### **Melancholy Heterosexuality.**

Butler also makes use of a range of ideas derived from psychoanalysis in a strategy of subverting the concepts of ‘normal’ sexual development and the primacy of the masculine phallus.

First let us examine Butler’s use of Freud in her concept of melancholy heterosexuality. In his essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917) Freud drew a distinction between mourning, the real loss of a loved object, which necessitates a process of grieving, through which we gradually remove the cathexis from the lost object, and melancholia in which the loss of an object is not acknowledged and therefore cannot openly be grieved. Since the melancholic cannot accept the loss of the object through grieving it is introjected, and preserved in the psyche, through an identification with the lost object.

In the later essay ‘The Ego and the Id’ (1923) Freud identifies ego formation as a melancholic structure:

When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia; ...the process, especially in the early phases of development, is a very frequent one, and it makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices. (EP p453)

Butler uses this observation of Freud’s as the basis for her notion of melancholy heterosexuality. Since, according to Freud, the infant starts off bisexual and polymorphously perverse (making no distinctions between the objects or the aims of erotogenic stimulation) prior to the incest taboo, set up as a result of the Oedipus complex, there must previously have taken place a taboo against homosexual attraction. According to Butler, because identifications substitute for lost objects, then

gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalised as a prohibition. This prohibition sanctions and regulates discrete gendered identity and the law of heterosexual desire. (GT p80)

Through the concept of melancholy heterosexuality Butler neatly turns on its head the traditional concept of heterosexuality as primary and homosexuality as aberrant.

Freud recognises that, due to the original bisexuality of the infant, there is a twofold aspect to the Oedipus complex, a positive and a negative side, a turning of sexual desire towards one parent and away from the other. How this original object choice is made is depend, according to Freud, on the 'disposition' of the infant.

It would appear, therefore, that in both sexes the relative strength of the masculine and feminine sexual dispositions is what determines whether the outcome of the Oedipus situation shall be an identification with the father or with the mother. (EP p456)

However, Butler claims that,

the language of 'dispositions' thus arrives as a false foundationalism, the results of affectivity being formed or 'fixed' through the effects of the prohibition. As a consequence, dispositions are not the primary sexual facts of the psyche, but produced effects of a law imposed by culture and by the complicitous and transvaluating acts of the ego ideal. (GT p81)

In other words, according to Butler, Freud's supposed original 'feminine' or 'masculine' disposition is the *effect* of identification with the parent of the same or opposite sex rather than the cause of those identifications. Sara Salih, in her book on Butler, neatly summarises the situation:

The melancholy heterosexual subject will 'bear' her or his forbidden same-sex desire on the surface of the body, so that physical 'ultra-femininity' and 'ultra-masculinity' denote the subject's relinquished desire for an object of the same sex. This means that you 'are' what you have desired, and that the desires you have been prevented from expressing are symptomatised on the body and in your behaviour. (JB p58)

However, there may be a problem of priority in Butler's account. Since Freud came to identify the ego ideal with the superego and the superego is generated as part of the prohibition against incest during the Oedipus conflict then the mechanism that Butler identifies as causing the prohibition against homosexuality (which happens before the prohibition against incest) only comes into being as a *result* of the Oedipal prohibition. If Butler is right this would seem to require positing the emergence of (at least in some incipient form) the superego at an earlier stage of development than the Oedipus complex.

### **Lesbian Phallus**

The primacy of the phallus, whether its presence, absence, fear of losing it, or envy over its possession, (along with Freud's consistent underplaying of the role of the mother as compared to the father in child development) gives psychoanalysis an inherently masculinist bias.

Whereas in Freud the phallus is always linked to its referent, the male genitals, in Lacan's reading of Freud the phallus symbolises independently of its referent, and in fact one of its important aspects is the lack of a referent. According to Lacan the infant acquires a sense of bodily integrity and separateness during the mirror stage as it observes itself in a literal or figurative mirror. The ego takes form as a projection onto the imaginary body during the mirror stage. Though still, in actuality lacking full control of its own body, the infant achieves mastery through the imaginary projection of the ego into the phantasmatically unified image of the body in the mirror.

According to Lacan the phallus is a specially privileged signifier since it initiates the entrance into the realm of the symbolic e.g. the acquisition of language. For Lacan, the phallus is the symbol of the penis, disconnected from the mere bodily part, it represents the lack the infant feels when it realises that the mother desires the phallus and the father can give her the phallus whereas the infant (male or female) cannot. As Sean Homer neatly summarises it in his book on Lacan:

The phallus is the signifier of lack. The phallus functions initially as an imaginary object – an object presumed to satisfy the mother's desire. It then functions symbolically through the recognition that desire cannot be satisfied and that as an object it will remain beyond reach. ... the phallus represents lack for both boys and girls, as both sexes are symbolically castrated. (JL p98-99)

According to Lacan the phallus becomes the locus for desire when the infant realises that the mother desires the phallus and the infant wants to be the phallus in order to satisfy the desire of the mother. Whereas the little boy has a penis and can therefore pretend to have the phallus the little girl must be the phallus, encapsulating the desire of the Other.

Butler collapses the distinction between having and being the phallus (just as she earlier collapsed the distinction between sex and gender) and suggests instead that both men and women can have and be the phallus. Since the phallus is a signifier of lack and sexual difference it can be re-territorialised onto any other body part and does not have to relate to the penis. Butler, in an allusion to bodily parts commonly employed in lesbian sex, states:

Consider that having the phallus can be symbolised by an arm, a tongue, a hand, a knee, a pelvic bone, an array of purposefully instrumentalised body-like things. (BTM p88)

Through her concept of the lesbian phallus Butler asserts that women can also have the powerful/primary signifier of the phallus as well as be it, thereby removing its privileged association with the masculine.

### **Abjection.**

As we saw above Lacan identified the mirror stage as marking the beginnings of a sense of bodily unity and a sense of the individual as a separate entity. Julia Kristeva argues that even before the mirror stage the infant begins to develop a sense of the borders between self and not-self, I and not-I through the process of abjection. This is the process whereby the infant jettisons or expels parts of itself through actions such as defecation, vomiting and spitting. The abject is therefore what has been expelled from the self and one defines oneself partly by what one is not. What has been abjected tends to cause horror or disgust and a violent rejection, accompanied by the fear that it will return and re-invade, so to speak, the self. To illustrate this point consider, for a moment, that one's mouth is full of saliva (one would be in great difficulty if it was not) now spit into one's hand and consider introducing the saliva back into one's mouth. There is a reluctance to reincorporate that which has been expelled; that is abjection.

We can now see how Kristeva's notion of abjection relates to Butler's conception of melancholy homosexuality. According to Butler a heterosexual gender identity is acquired through a process of repudiating homosexual attachments, and the abjected same-sex desire is installed in the ego as a melancholic identification. Through this process, at a societal level, homosexuals become the abjected bodies of society, needed in order to give heterosexual normativity a sense of identity but also loathed and feared as something disgusting liable at any minute to invade heterosexual identity. Clearly this concept can also be applied to sexist and racist forms of prejudice:

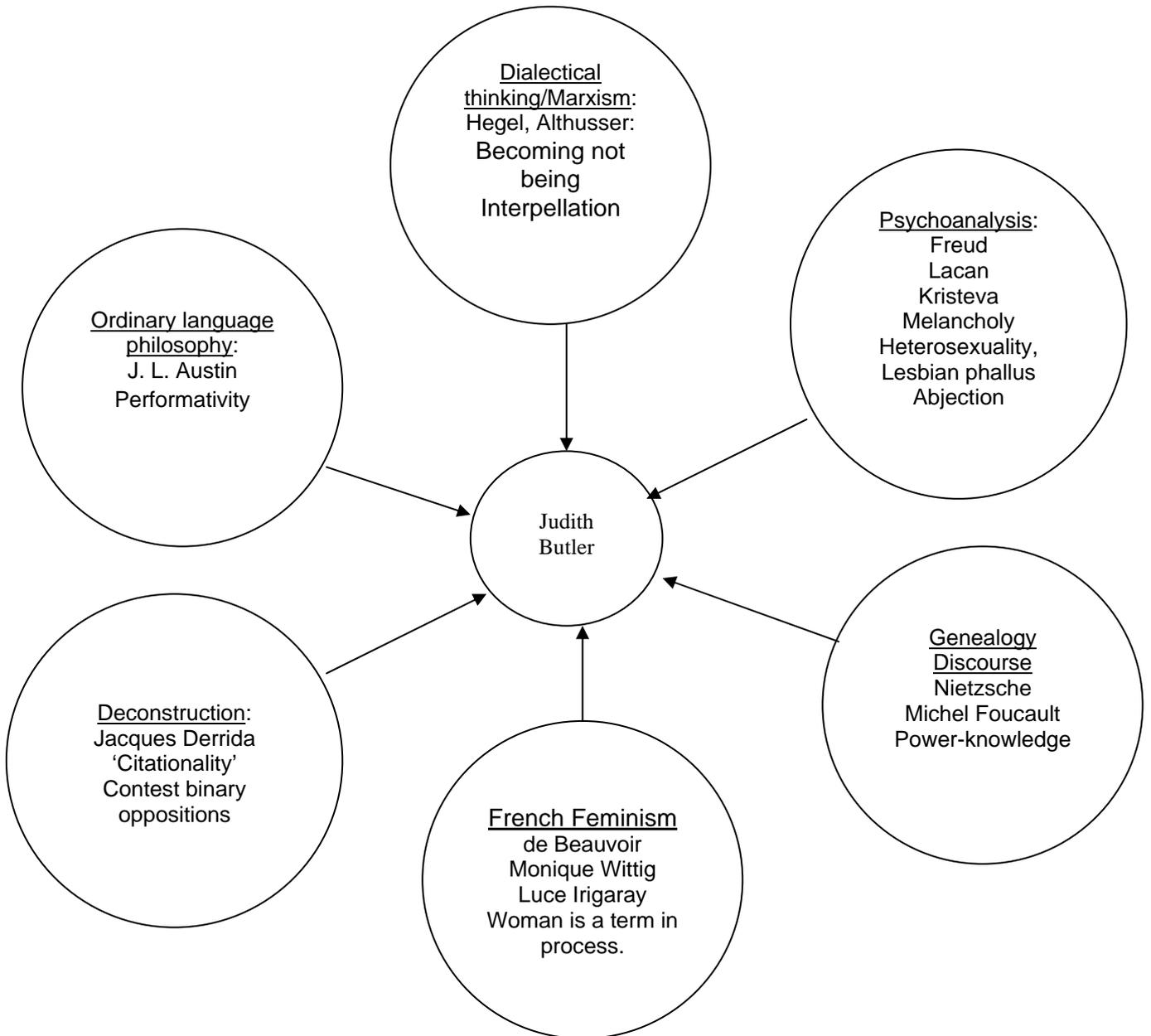
The 'object' designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered 'Other'. This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the 'not-me' as the object establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject. ... the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or colour is an 'expulsion' followed by a 'repulsion' that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation. (GT p169-170)

The title of Butler's book *Bodies That Matter* plays on the meaning of the word 'matter'. It refers both to 'matter' in the sense of material, since much of the book is concerned with demonstrating the constructed notion of 'facts' which are commonly thought to be purely material. But it also refers to bodies that matter in the sense of who counts as a body, who is important or significant enough to count in our society. Abject bodies do not count and there are many abjected bodies in various societies around the world: gays, women, blacks, minority groups of all kinds, and poor people. Consider how little the lives of poor third world people count compared to the lives of affluent first world people. Consider the thousands of (largely nameless) Iraqis who have lost their lives in recent years and how little those lives count compared to the lives of an American serviceman or a hostage. These are bodies who do not count, the abjected bodies of our civilisation.

Through a series of brilliant appropriations of key concepts derived from ordinary language philosophy, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis Butler succeeds in providing a powerful and provocative analysis of sex, gender, sexuality, and racism. Her work provides a subtle and stimulating set of tools for understanding the multiple ways in which identities and norms are constructed and enforced within contemporary society.

END

## Judith Butler: Sources of ideas



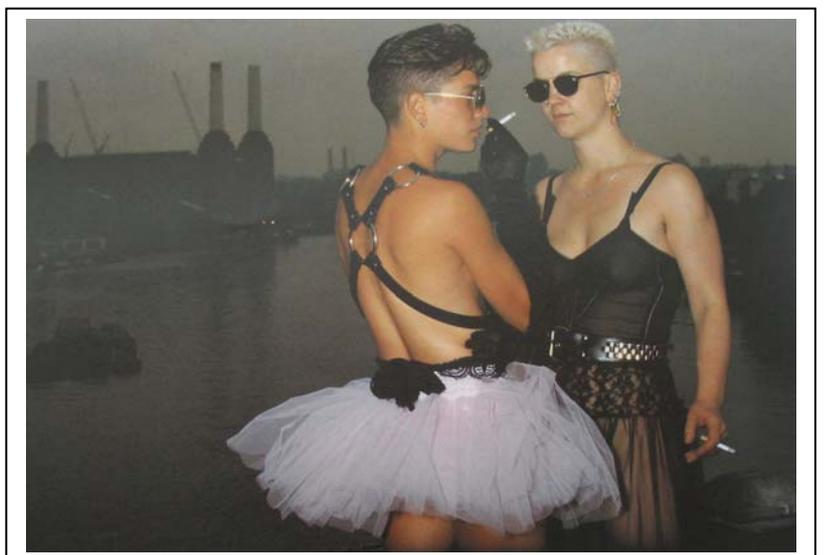
Left:

Gender Trouble illustrated :-

Doing gender differently.

Subverting establish sexed and gendered roles through parody.

Photograph by Della Grace from 'Love Bites'.



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- Judith Butler *Bodies That Matter* (London 1993) BTM
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- Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London, 2005) (JL)
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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> As Derrida points out in 'Signature Event Context' 'a context is never absolutely determinable, or rather . . . its determination is never certain or saturated.' SEC p84

<sup>2</sup> See Stanley Fish's lucid article on Austin and Derrida in 'With the Compliments of the Author' for a further elaboration of these points.

<sup>3</sup> Note that this argument about iterability has interesting affinities with Wittgenstein's argument about private language; a private language, in Wittgenstein's sense, could not be iterable because we could never know if the words were ever being used with the same meaning.

<sup>4</sup> For Butler's fascinating discussion of Zizek's ideas on the performativity of naming see BTM p208-222.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on intersex see the website for the UK Intersex Assoc. at [www.ukia.co.uk](http://www.ukia.co.uk)