

# Gender as Performance

## An Interview with Judith Butler

*Judith Butler teaches in the Rhetoric Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Her first book, Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France (1987) traced the dialectic of pro- and anti-Hegelian currents in French theory across the writings of a wide range of thinkers. She is best known, however, for her second book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), which has proved as influential as it is controversial in its analysis of 'sex', 'gender' and 'sexuality' as forms of enforced cultural performance. In particular, it has been read by many as standing at the forefront of the new 'queer theory' – a tendency within gay and lesbian studies which foregrounds same-sex desire without specifying the sex of the partners, in the hope of escaping the theoretical constraints of gender difference. Gender Trouble calls into question the need for a stable 'female' identity for feminist practice, and explores the radical potential of a critique of categories of identity. It argues that gender identities acquire what stability and coherence they have in the context of the 'heterosexual matrix'. In this discursive chaining of gender to sexuality, it is suggested, subversive possibilities arise for making 'gender trouble'. In her most recent book, Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of 'Sex' (1993), Butler addresses some of the misconceptions which have accompanied both the popularity and the notoriety of Gender Trouble. Concentrating this time on what is meant by the materiality of the body, she looks at the forcible production of 'sex', at heterosexual presumptions, and how they can contribute to their own subversion. In October 1993, Butler came to London to give a talk on 'Subjection' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and we took the opportunity to record this interview.*

**RP:** We'd like to begin by asking you where you place your work within the increasingly diverse field of gender studies. Most people associate your recent writings with what has become known as 'queer theory'. But the emergence of gay and lesbian studies as a discrete disciplinary phenomenon has problematised the relationship of some of this work to feminism. Do you see yourself primarily as a feminist or as a queer theorist, or do you refuse the choice?

**Butler:** I would say that I'm a feminist theorist before I'm a queer theorist or a gay and lesbian theorist. My commitments to feminism are probably my primary commitments. *Gender Trouble* was a critique of compulsory heterosexuality within feminism, and it was feminists that were my intended audience. At the time I wrote the text there was no gay and lesbian studies, as I understood it.

When the book came out, the Second Annual Conference of Lesbian and Gay Studies was taking place in the USA, and it got taken up in a way that I could never have anticipated. I remember sitting next to someone at a dinner party, and he said that he was working on queer theory. And I said: What's queer theory? He looked at me like I was crazy, because he evidently thought that I was a part of this thing called queer theory. But all I knew was that Teresa de Lauretis had published an issue of the journal *Differences* called 'Queer Theory'. I thought it was something she had put together. It certainly never occurred to me that I was a part of queer theory.

I have some problems here, because I think there's some anti-feminism in queer theory. Also, insofar as some people in queer theory want to claim that the analysis of sexuality can be radically separated from the analysis of gender, I'm very much opposed to them. The new *Gay and Lesbian Reader* that Routledge have just published begins with a set of articles that make that claim. I think that separation is a big mistake. Catharine MacKinnon's work sets up such a reductive causal relationship between sexuality and gender that she came to stand for an extreme version of feminism that had to be combatted. But it seems to me that to combat it through a queer theory that dissociates itself from feminism altogether is a massive mistake.

**RP:** Could you say something more about the sex-gender distinction? Do you reject it or do you just reject a particular interpretation of it? Your position on this seems to have shifted recently.

**Butler:** One of the interpretations that has been made of *Gender Trouble* is that there is no sex, there is only gender, and gender is performative. People then go on to think that if gender is performative it must be radically free. And it has seemed to many that the materiality of the body is vacated or ignored or negated here – disavowed, even. (There's a symptomatic reading of this as somatophobia. It's interesting to have one's text pathologised.) So what became important to me in writing *Bodies that Matter* was to go back to the category of sex, and to the problem of materiality, and to ask how it is that sex itself might be construed as a norm. Now, I take it that's a presupposition of Lacanian psychoanalysis – that sex is a norm. But I didn't want to remain restricted within the Lacanian purview. I wanted to work out how a norm actually materialises a body, how we might understand the materiality of the body to be not only invested with a norm, but in some sense animated by a norm, or contoured by a norm. So I have shifted. I think that I overrode the category of sex too quickly in

*Gender Trouble*. I try to reconsider it in *Bodies That Matter*, and to emphasise the place of constraint in the very production of sex.

**RP:** A lot of people liked *Gender Trouble* because they liked the idea of gender as a kind of improvisational theatre, a space where different identities can be more or less freely adopted and explored at will. They wanted to get on with the work of enacting gender, in order to undermine its dominant forms. However, at the beginning of *Bodies That Matter* you say that, of course, one doesn't just voluntaristically construct or deconstruct identities. It's unclear to us to what extent you want to hold onto the possibilities opened up in *Gender Trouble* of being able to use transgressive performances such as drag to help decentre or destabilise gender categories, and to what extent you have become sceptical about this.

**Butler:** The problem with drag is that I offered it as an example of performativity, but it has been taken up as the paradigm for performativity. One ought always to be wary of one's examples. What's interesting is that this voluntarist interpretation, this desire for a kind of radical theatrical remaking of the body, is obviously out there in the public sphere. There's a desire for a fully phantasmatic transfiguration of the body. But no, I don't think that drag is a paradigm for the subversion of gender. I don't think that if we were all more dragged out gender life would become more expansive and less restrictive. There are restrictions in drag. In fact, I argued toward the end of the book that drag has its own melancholia.

It is important to understand performativity – which is distinct from performance – through the more limited notion of resignification. I'm still thinking about subversive repetition, which is a category in *Gender Trouble*, but in the place of something like parody I would now emphasise the complex ways in which resignification works in political discourse. I suspect there's going to be a less celebratory, and less popular, response to my new book. But I wanted to write against my popular image. I set out to make myself less popular, because I felt that the popularisation of *Gender Trouble* – even though it was interesting culturally to see what it tapped into, to see what was out there, longing to be tapped into – ended up being a terrible misrepresentation of what I wanted to say!

**RP:** Perhaps we could help to set that right here, by asking you what you mean by 'performativity' – by describing gender as performance. What's the ontological status of performativity, for example? And how does it fit into the Foucauldian discourse about regulatory norms which you deploy? Is performativity the generic category of which regulatory norms are historically specific instances, or what? Are you offering us a kind of pragmatism?

**Butler:** First, it is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject. The place where I try to clarify this is toward the beginning of my essay 'Critically Queer', in *Bodies that Matter*. I begin with the Foucauldian premise that power works in part through discourse and it works in part to produce and destabilise subjects. But then, when one starts to think carefully about how discourse might be said to produce a

subject, it's clear that one's already talking about a certain figure or trope of production. It is at this point that it's useful to turn to the notion of performativity, and performative speech acts in particular – understood as those speech acts that bring into being that which they name. This is the moment in which discourse becomes productive in a fairly specific way. So what I'm trying to do is think about performativity as *that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names*. Then I take a further step, through the Derridean rewriting of Austin, and suggest that this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. So if you want the ontology of this, I guess performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established. Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed. Something like that.

## THE BODY IN QUESTION

**RP:** And what about the body? You see bodies as forcibly produced through particular discourses. Some might say that you haven't adequately addressed the biological constraints on bodies here. Take the female body's capacity for impregnation, for example. Why is it that male bodies don't get produced as child bearing? There are certain constraints coming from the body itself which you don't seem to register. Shouldn't you be talking about the constraints on discourse as well as 'the discursive limits of "sex"'?

**Butler:** Yes, but doesn't everybody else talk about that? There's so much out there on that.

**RP:** But if you don't say anything about it, people will think you don't accept any limits.

**Butler:** Yes, there will be that exasperated response, but there is a good tactical reason to reproduce it. Take your example of impregnation. Somebody might well say: isn't it the case that certain bodies go to the gynecologist for certain kinds of examination and certain bodies do not? And I would obviously affirm that. But the real question here is: to what extent does a body get defined by its capacity for pregnancy? Why is it pregnancy by which that body gets defined? One might say it's because somebody is of a given sex that they go to the gynecologist to get an examination that establishes the possibility of pregnancy, or one might say that going to the gynecologist is the very production of 'sex' — but it is still the question of pregnancy that is centering that whole institutional practice here.

Now it seems to me that, although women's bodies generally speaking are understood as capable of impregnation, the fact of the matter is that there are female infants and children who cannot be impregnated, there are older women who cannot be impregnated, there are women of all ages who cannot be impregnated, and even if they could ideally, that is not necessarily the salient feature of their bodies or even of their being women. What the question does is try to make the problematic of reproduction central to the sexing of the body. But I am not sure that is, or ought to be, what is absolutely salient or primary in the sexing of the body. If it is, I think it's the imposition of a norm, not a neutral description of biological constraints.

I do not deny certain kinds of biological differences. But I

always ask under what conditions, under what discursive and institutional conditions, do certain biological differences – and they're not necessary ones, given the anomalous state of bodies in the world – become the salient characteristics of sex. In that sense I'm still in sympathy with the critique of 'sex' as a political category offered by Monique Wittig. I still very much believe in the critique of the category of sex and the ways in which it's been constrained by a tacit institution of compulsory reproduction.

It's a practical problem. If you are in your late twenties or your early thirties and you can't get pregnant for biological reasons, or maybe you don't want to, for social reasons – whatever it is – you are struggling with a norm that is regulating your sex. It takes a pretty vigorous (and politically informed) community around you to alleviate the possible sense of failure, or loss, or impoverishment, or inadequacy – a collective struggle to rethink a dominant norm. Why shouldn't it be that a woman who wants to have some part in child-rearing, but doesn't want to have a part in child-bearing, or who wants to have nothing to do with either, can inhabit her gender without an implicit sense of failure or inadequacy? When people ask the question 'Aren't *these* biological differences?', they're not really asking a question about the materiality of the body. They're actually asking whether or not the social institution of reproduction is the most salient one for thinking about gender. In that sense, there is a discursive enforcement of a norm.

## THE HETEROSEXUAL COMEDY

**RP:** This leads us to the question of heterosexuality.

**Butler:** I don't know much about heterosexuality!

**RP:** Don't worry, it's a theoretical question. You have argued that one thing the gay/lesbian pair can give to heterosexuals is the knowledge of heterosexuality as both compulsory system and inevitable comedy. Could you say more about why it's inevitably a comedy. If we understand heterosexuality as repetitive performance, why does the performance always fail? What is it that makes it fail, that means it can only ever be a copy of itself, a copy of something it can never fully be?

**Butler:** Maybe there's a relationship between anxiety and repetition that needs to be underscored here. I think one of the reasons that heterosexuality has to re-elaborate itself, to ritualistically reproduce itself all over the place, is that it has to overcome some constitutive sense of its own tenuousness. Performance needs to be rethought here as a ritualistic reproduction, in terms of what I now call 'performativity'.

**RP:** But what creates this tenuousness?

**Butler:** Why is it tenuous? Well, it's a fairly funny way of being in the world. I mean, how is it – as Freud asked in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* – that you get this polymorphous, or at least minimally bisexual, being to craft its sexuality in such a way that it's focused exclusively on a member of the opposite sex, and wants to engage with that person in some kind of genital sex?

**RP:** So you'd give a psychoanalytical answer. We thought you might have a more Foucauldian response. Does the above apply to all social categories?

**Butler:** No, it applies to all *sexual* positions. It's not just the norm of heterosexuality that is tenuous. It's all sexual norms. I think that every sexual position is fundamentally comic. If you say 'I can only desire X', what you've immediately done, in rendering desire exclusively, is created a whole set of positions which are unthinkable from the standpoint of your identity. Now, I take it that one of the essential aspects of comedy emerges when you end up actually occupying a position that you have just announced to be unthinkable. That is funny. There's a terrible self-subversion in it.

When they were debating gays in the military on television in the United States a senator got up and laughed, and he said, 'I must say, I know very little about homosexuality. I think I know less about homosexuality than about anything else in the world.' And it was a big announcement of his ignorance of homosexuality. Then he immediately launched into a homophobic diatribe which suggested that he thinks that homosexuals only have sex in public bathrooms, that they are all skinny, that they're all male, etc, etc. So what he actually has is a very aggressive and fairly obsessive relationship to the homosexuality that of course he knows nothing about. At that moment you realise that this person who claims to have nothing to do with homosexuality is in fact utterly preoccupied by it.

I do not think that these exclusions are indifferent.

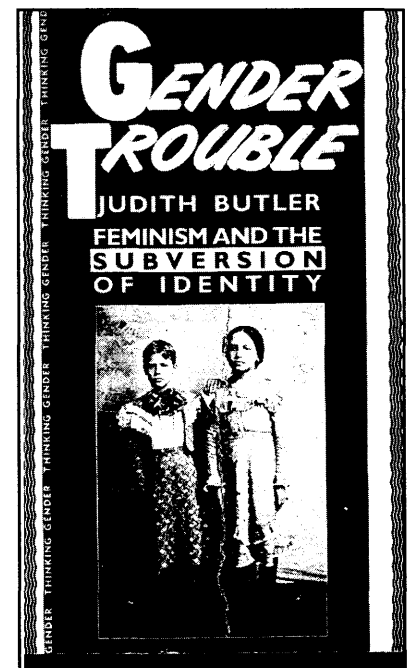
Some would disagree with me on this and say: 'Look, some people are just indifferent. A heterosexual can have an indifferent relationship to homosexuality. It doesn't really matter what other people do. I haven't thought about it much, it neither turns me on nor turns me off. I'm just sexually neutral in that regard.' I don't believe that. I think that crafting a sexual position, or reciting a sexual position, always involves becoming haunted by what's excluded. And the more rigid the position, the greater the ghost, and the more threatening it is in some way. I don't know if that's a Foucauldian point. It's probably a psychoanalytic point, but that's not finally important to me.

**RP:** Would it apply to homosexuals' relationship to heterosexuality?

**Butler:** Yes, absolutely.

**RP:** Although presumably not in the same way ...

**Butler:** Yes, there's a different problem here, and it's a tricky one. When the woman in the audience at my talk said 'I survived lesbian feminism and still desire women', I thought that was a really great line, because one of the problems has been



the normative requirement that has emerged within some lesbian-feminist communities to come up with a radically specific lesbian sexuality. (Of course, not all lesbian feminism said this, but a strain of it did.) Whatever you were doing in your sexual relations with women had to be very much between women. It could have no hint of heterosexuality in it. In the early days that included a taboo on penetration. More recently, there have been questions about relations of domination and submission, about sadomasochism, questions of pornography, of exhibitionism, of dildoes, and any number of fetishistic displays. The question is: are these practices straight, or can they be made gay? And if they can be made gay, can they be radically and irreducibly gay? Because we don't want to be seen as somehow borrowing from, or copying, or miming heterosexual culture.

I guess this is my Hegelianism: one is defined as much by what one is not as by the position that one explicitly inhabits. There is a constitutive interrelationship. Lesbians make themselves into a more frail political community by insisting on the radical irreducibility of their desire. I don't think any of us have irreducibly distinct desires. One might say that there are heterosexual structures that get played out in gay and lesbian scenes, but that does not constitute the co-option of homosexuality by heterosexuality. If anything it's the reterritorialization of heterosexuality within homosexuality.

**RP: It's interesting that you refer to your Hegelianism here. To what extent would you be prepared to characterise your work as 'dialectical'? Most people who use Foucault and Derrida, for example, in the way you do, would want to resist the notion of dialectic.**

**Butler:** I don't know if I resist the notion of dialectic. I certainly think that it has to be supplemented. I would say that in the construction of any binary – when we take masculine and feminine as a binary, for example – what's interesting is not just how the masculine presupposes the feminine, and 'is' the feminine in the Hegelian sense, or the feminine presupposes and 'is' the masculine, but how a field is produced in which there are these two mutually exclusive and mutually defining possibilities, and only these two. There are a set of exclusions that are made in the production of any binary, and those exclusions never make their way into intelligent discourse. That's where the notion of the abject comes in. I accept the Derridean notion that every dialectical opposition is produced through a set of exclusions, and that what is outside the dialectic – which is not a negation – cannot be contained by the dialectic. This provides the opportunity for an important critical reflection on the limitations of dialectical opposition.

**RP: Speaking of binaries, it is interesting, isn't it, the quite pivotal role which discussions of lesbian sexuality have had in feminist approaches to sexuality since the 1970s. Amber Hollibaugh said that at one point all feminists were trying to have sex the way they thought dykes were doing it. Then later on, in response to the puritanism which some feminists ended up adopting because of this, it was lesbian discussions that introduced a new sexual radicalism. All the way through feminist discussion of sexuality, discussions about lesbian**

**sexuality have been in the vanguard of how to think about sex.**

**Butler:** Yes, some of the romanticising of lesbianism is a consequence of heterosexual guilt, which is the corollary of the phenomenon that I'm talking about. If what is radically lesbian is over here, untainted by heterosexuality, then heterosexuality is constructed as a phenomenon that can only be staining or hurtful. And when it emerges within lesbianism, it is the selling out of lesbianism. And for the straight or bisexual woman, this opposition reconsolidates guilt. This has kept us from really thinking through the comedy of heterosexuality – the compulsory and comic character of heterosexuality – because that means in some sense to own it. On the other hand, I think it's impoverished our analyses of lesbianism and bisexuality as well. The other way this logic works is to make bisexuality into a sell-out position or a traitorous position, or a duplicitous position. That's a horribly moralising and unfruitful way to think about it.

**RP: You yourself have made quite a move, haven't you, from over a decade ago, when you contributed to the book *Against Sadomasochism* ...**

**Butler:** No, that wasn't me, that was someone else with my name!

**RP: It *wasn't* you?**

**Butler:** Okay, it was me, but I disavow it. I was really young! I was really guilt-tripped by feminism. That essay is very ambivalent about the notion that sexuality and power are co-extensive, but I didn't yet know how to reflect on that ambivalence in a non-moralising way.

## PSYCHOANALYSIS & THE SYMBOLIC

**RP: Perhaps we could go back to psychoanalysis at this point. *Gender Trouble* contains a fairly severe critique of the psychoanalytical perspective on sexual difference. Yet psychoanalysis has since come to play an increasingly central role in your work. How useful do you find psychoanalysis for your theorisation of gender?**

**Butler:** I probably misled you earlier. I don't actually accept Freud's postulation of a primary bisexuality or polymorphousness, although I do think that any given sexual arrangement is peculiar, and not necessary. The problem I have with Freud's articulation of bisexuality is that it is actually heterosexuality. There's the feminine part that wants a masculine object, and the masculine part that wants a feminine one. Swell, we have two heterosexual desires and we're going to call that bisexuality. So I reject that.

I also think that polymorphousness is a fantasy: the minute you're born into the world you're interpolated in various ways. But this is where I would stop – this is where I would depart from both a structuralist psychoanalysis and a more developmental object-relations one. Because at that moment they're going to start saying: 'you're subject to the law of sexual difference from the minute you're born in the world'. And that law becomes unalterable. There are various relationships to it that can be taken, but the law itself remains unalterable. Or there's a developmental trajectory, differentiation from the mother, etc., which leads to

certain kinds of object formations, or formations of attachment. This is where I want to take these models apart, because I feel that's the moment at which a certain kind of heterosexual norm is re-established.

I think there's a really strong heterosexualizing imperative in the Lacanian account of the Oedipal phase, the Oedipal scene, one should say. And I also think that in object relations theory lesbianism is almost always figured as a certain kind of fusion, which I find extremely problematic. On the other hand, there is much in psychoanalytic perspectives that is *very* valuable. It is the best way we have of understanding how sexual positions are assumed. It is the best account of the psyche – and psychic subjection – that we have. I don't think one can offer an account of how sexuality is formed without psychoanalysis. But I also think that the psychoanalytic sciences are part of the forming of sexuality, and have become more and more part of that forming. I'm with Foucault on that. They don't simply report on the life of the infant, they've become part of the crafting of that life.

**RP: We'd like to turn to your critique of the tripartite Lacanian division of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real at this point. One thing we found particularly interesting was the way you criticised Lacan's division between the imaginary and the symbolic by arguing that the role of the phallus in making that distinction is homologous to the role of the bodily image in the mirror phase. So entry into the symbolic is actually merely an extension of the imaginary, and what Lacanians call the symbolic, and reify into the law of the father, is in fact only a hegemonic imaginary.**



**Butler:** Yes.

**RP: We have two problems with this. The first is that, as we understand Lacan, the imaginary is always already symbolic, so 'entry' into the symbolic is simply the point at which the symbolic character of the imaginary becomes clear. Secondly, although your critique dethrones the phallus from its position of psychic absolutism in the**

**Lacanian symbolic, on the other hand what you call the 'heterosexual matrix' stands in for it. So although the phallus is no longer king by virtue of some kind of psychic law, there's a Foucauldian, historicist equivalent to it, which is equally absolute. It may be socially and historically produced, but you treat it as being just as absolute within the present.**

**Butler:** Good question. Two responses. One is that although I would accept the notion that every speaking being is born into a symbolic order that is always-already-there, I think the Lacanians describe that order, and the status of its always-already-thereness, in too static a way. The symbolic is repeatedly produced,

reproduced, and possibly derailed. I agree with Derrida here in his analysis of structure in 'Structure, Sign and Play' in *Writing and Difference*. A structure only becomes a structure by repeating its structurality. Iterability is the way in which a structure gets solidified, but it also implies the possibility of that structure's derailment. So I do think the symbolic is always-already-there, but it's also always in the process of being made, and remade. It can't continue to exist without the ritualistic productions whereby it is continuously reinstalled. And it gets reinstalled through an imaginary idealisation which is rendered as symbolic, as necessary and as immutable. The symbolic is the rendering immutable of given idealizations.

**RP: And where does this come from – the rendering immutable?**

**Butler:** It's what Lacan gives us as the mirror stage. When we talk about the operation of the imaginary, we're talking about a misrecognition by which an idealised version of oneself is taken to be oneself.

**RP: So you believe in the mirror phase?**

**Butler:** Believe in the mirror phase! I think it allegorises a certain kind of idealising move that continuously misrepresents and idealises the ego. And I think the phallus is precisely such an idealisation. Now, if that's true, and if the mirror stage is part of the imaginary, then the phallus is nothing other than an imaginary and impossible idealisation of the masculine. The symbolic gets reproduced by taking imaginary projections and recasting them as law. That's much more of a Freudian approach than a Lacanian one. But I don't mind that. I'm probably closer to Freud than I am to Lacan. There's more leeway, more complexity, in Freud.

**RP: And slightly less authoritarianism?**

**Butler:** Well, at least he throws up his hands every once in a while and says, 'I have no idea what I'm doing here'! At least he models a certain self-questioning. As for your second point – the heterosexual matrix – I think you're right about *Gender Trouble*. The heterosexual matrix became a kind of totalising symbolic, and that's why I changed the term in *Bodies That Matter* to heterosexual *hegemony*. This opens the possibility that this is a matrix which is open to rearticulation, which has a kind of malleability. So I don't actually use the term heterosexual matrix in *Bodies That Matter*.

**RP: Presumably, the dependence of coherent genders on a 'compulsory' heterosexual framing couldn't be universalised, anthropologically, could it?**

**Butler:** Well, you could probably make an argument that gender positions within culture are in some ways related to positions within reproductive relations. But it would be a bit of a leap to claim that those reproductive relations involve compulsory heterosexuality, since there are cultures that accommodate reproductive relations without mandating heterosexuality.

There's a very specific notion of gender involved in compulsory heterosexuality: a certain view of gender coherence whereby what a person feels, how a person acts, and how a person

expresses herself sexually is the articulation and consummation of a gender. It's a particular causality and identity that gets established as gender coherence which is linked to compulsory heterosexuality. It's not any gender, or all gender, it's that specific kind of coherent gender.

**RP:** Psychoanalytically, this leads us in the direction of the Lacanian 'real'. One way that someone like Zizek would respond to your erosion of the fixity of the Lacanian symbolic by the fluidity of imaginary identifications would be to appeal to the 'real' as the ultimate bedrock of a compulsory construction of this kind of coherent gender. How would you respond to that?

**Butler:** That's where I get scared. He wants to make it permanent, and we're the permanent outside. It's as if we've got girls, we've got boys, and then we have the permanent outside. No way! We've got lots of people rolling around the streets who are the 'outside' to girls and boys who Zizek is naming as the impossible real. It's a hell of a thing to live in the world being called the impossible real – being called the traumatic, the unthinkable, the psychotic – being cast outside the social, and getting named as the unlivable and the unspeakable. This worries me. What he's doing is consolidating these binaries as absolutely necessary. He's rendering a whole domain of social life that does not fully conform to prevalent gender norms as psychotic and unlivable.

**RP:** You find a moralising compulsion in Zizek's Lacanianism?

**Butler:** The line between psychosis and the social and sexual positionalities that have been rendered abject or unthinkable in our society is very fuzzy. The structural rigidity of the symbolic in Zizek's work runs the risk of producing a domain of psychosis that may well be a social domain. One of the problems with homosexuality is that it does represent psychosis to some people. Many people feel that who they are as egos in the world, whatever imaginary centres they have, would be radically dissolved were they to engage in homosexual relations. They would rather die than engage in homosexual relations. For these people homosexuality represents the prospect of the psychotic dissolution of the subject. How are we to distinguish that phobic abjection of homosexuality from what Zizek calls the real – where the real is that which stands outside the symbolic pact and which threatens the subject within the symbolic pact with psychosis?

## THE LESBIAN PHALLUS

**RP:** Could you say something about what you mean by the 'lesbian phallus'? Presumably, it's part of your counter-hegemonic struggle against the phallus itself ...

**Butler:** I thought it was kind of funny. People get a little worried about it!

**RP:** Some people take it literally and say: 'I know just what it is, I keep three of them in my drawer.'

**Butler:** Yes, that's unfortunate, an unfortunate literalization! I wouldn't exclude it, but it would be a problem for me if the lesbian

phallus were reduced to the notion of the dildo. That would ruin its speculative force.

So, what does it signify? Well, in the first place, it's a contradiction in terms for most people who talk about the phallus, to the extent that 'having' the phallus and 'being' the phallus within the Lacanian framework correspond to a masculine position and a feminine position, respectively. In the lesbian the having and the being are in relation to one another (although of course Lacan would say this is not a relation at all). To claim that the lesbian either has or is the phallus is already to disrupt the presumptive alignment of masculinity with having and femininity with being, and with that, the relation in which they are conceived.

However, I wanted to do more crossings than that. I wanted to suggest that having and being are not mutually exclusive positions, and that there are a variety of identificatory possibilities that get animated within homosexuality and heterosexuality and bisexuality, which cannot be easily reduced to that particular framework. Of course, there's also a joke in 'The Lesbian Phallus' because to have the phallus in Lacan is also to control the signifier. It is to write and to name, to authorise and to designate. So in some sense I'm wielding the lesbian phallus in offering my critique of the Lacanian framework. It's a certain model for lesbian authorship. It's parody.

**RP:** Could there also be the female heterosexual phallus?

**Butler:** Yes, but that's been around for a while. The female heterosexual phallus has been the phallic mother. The way it usually works is that when the woman has it she becomes the phallic mother, and she becomes absolutely terrifying.

**RP:** Couldn't one have it without being the mother?

**Butler:** That's the question: why is it that when the woman is said to have the phallus she can only be the terrifying engulfing mother? What would it mean to separate the heterosexual woman who has the phallus from the phallic mother? It's an important thing to do.



## QUEER POLITICS

**RP:** Perhaps we could move on to the politics of queer theory, and in particular to the ideas of subversive repetition and transgressive reinscription, which we touched on earlier when we asked you about drag. Alan Sinfield has suggested that the problem with supposedly subversive representations of gender is that they're always recuperable. The dominant can always find a way of dismissing them and reaffirming itself. On the other hand, Jonathan Dollimore has argued that they're not always recuperable, but that any queer reading or subversive performance, any challenge to dominant representations of gender, can only be sustained as such *collectively*. It's only within critical subcultures that transgressive reinscriptions are going to make a difference. How do you respond to these views on the limits of a queer politics of representation?

**Butler:** I think that Sinfield is right to say that any attempt at subversion is potentially recuperable. There is no way to safeguard against that. You can't plan or calculate subversion. In fact, I would say that subversion is precisely an incalculable effect. That's what makes it subversive. As for the question of how a certain challenge becomes legible, and whether a rendering requires a certain collectivity, that seems right too. But I also think that subversive practices have to overwhelm the capacity to read, challenge conventions of reading, and demand new possibilities of reading.

For instance, when Act Up (the lesbian and gay activist group) first started performing Die-ins on the streets of New York, it was extremely dramatic. There had been street theatre, a tradition of demonstrations, and the tradition from the civil disobedience side of the civil rights movement of going limp and making policemen take you away: playing dead. Those precedents or conventions were taken up in the Die-in, where people 'die' all at once. They went down on the street, all at once, and white lines were drawn around the bodies, as if they were police lines marking the place of the dead. It was a shocking symbolisation. It was legible insofar as it was drawing on conventions that had been produced within previous protest cultures, but it was a renovation. It was a new adumbration of a certain kind of civil disobedience. And it was extremely graphic. It made people stop and *have to read* what was happening.

There was confusion. People didn't know at first, why these people were playing dead. Were they actually dying, were they actually people with AIDS? Maybe they were, maybe they weren't. Maybe they were HIV positive, maybe they weren't. There were no ready answers to those questions. The act posed a set of questions without giving you the tools to read off the answers. What I worry about are those acts that are more immediately legible. Those are the ones that I think are most readily recuperable. But the ones that challenge our practices of reading, that make us uncertain about how to read, or make us think that we have to renegotiate the way in which we read public signs, these seem really important to me.

The Kiss-ins that Queer Nation did at various shopping malls were quite outrageous. There had been Kiss-ins in front of the Supreme Court when gay statutes were being discussed. I think that was the first one, actually, the Kiss-in at the Supreme Court building. (I was invited but I didn't go, because I didn't want to kiss just anybody!) They worked for a while, but they always run the risk of becoming tropes. Once they've been read, once they're

done too often, they become deadened tropes, as it were. They become predictable. And it's precisely when they get predictable, or when you know how to read them in advance, or you know what's coming, that they just don't work any more.

**RP:** So they're most subversive when the subculture itself is still struggling over them? When one group of lesbians, for example, are trying to smash up the screen and rip the film out of the projector, while the other ones are saying 'Yes, this is a really usefully rethinking of female sexuality, look how it undoes the heterosexual reading by placing the lesbian couple differently within the scenario', etc?

**Butler:** Right. Some people would say that we need a ground from which to act. We need a shared collective ground for collective action. I think we need to pursue the moments of degrounding, when we're standing in two different places at once; or we don't know exactly where we're standing; or when we've produced an aesthetic practice that shakes the ground. That's where resistance to recuperation happens. It's like a breaking through to a new set of paradigms.

**RP:** What are the relations of this kind of symbolic politics to more traditional kinds of political practice? Presumably, its function is in some way tied to the role of mass media in the political systems of advanced capitalist societies, where representations play a role they don't necessarily have elsewhere.

**Butler:** Yes, I agree.

**RP:** Yet at the same time, it is a crucial part of this role that the domain of representation often remains completely cut off from effective political action. One might argue that the reason a politics of representation is so recuperable is precisely because it remains within the domain of representation – that it is only an adjunct to the business of transforming the relationship of society to the state, establishing new institutions, or changing the law. How would you respond to that?

**Butler:** First of all, I oppose the notion that the media is monolithic. It's neither monolithic nor does it act only and always to domesticate. Sometimes it ends up producing images that it has no control over. This kind of unpredictable effect can emerge right out of the centre of a conservative media without an awareness that it is happening. There are ways of exploiting the dominant media. The politics of aesthetic representation has an extremely important place. But it is not the same as struggling to change the law, or developing strong links with political officials, or amassing major lobbies, or the kinds of things needed by the grassroots movement to overturn anti-sodomy restrictions, for example.

I used to be part of a guerrilla theatre group called LIPS – it stood for nothing, which I loved – and now I'm contemplating joining the board of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. There's nothing to keep me from doing one rather than the other. For me, it does not have to be a choice. Other people are particularly adept working in the health care fields, doing AIDS activism – which includes sitting on the boards of major chemical corporations – doing lobbying work, phoning, or being on the street. The Foucauldian in me says there is no one site from which to struggle effectively. There have to be many, and they don't need to be reconciled with one another.

## DEMOCRACY AT LARGE

**RP: Do you see the success of these kinds of sexual politics as depending on their connection to broader left-liberal alliances? Or do you view them more autonomously, more defensively perhaps, as part of a separate sphere which will have to look after itself, since its agenda is treated with such suspicion or contempt by the mainstream?**

**Butler:** I don't think that I could make the gay arena into the fundamental one, and then approach questions of racism or feminism, for example, within the context of the gay movement. I understand myself as a progressive anti-Zionist Jew. I think my Jewish background is more formative than anything else – which is probably why I can't write about it. My agony and shame over the State of Israel is enormous, and the kind of contributions I make in that domain have very little to do with my being queer. They may have something to do with being a woman, but they're more closely related to certain kinds of anti-racist views that I have.

I don't believe that states ought to be based on race. It puts Israel on a par with South Africa. I'm willing to make that analogy, and I'm also willing to talk about the economic and military arrangements that those two countries have between them. So I feel left of the Jewish left in this particular way. I was touring recently in Germany. I was supposed to be talking about gender, but I ended up only talking about race. I started writing about racism and responsibility in the German press. (There's a debate going on about the relationship between the Turks, as the new Jews, and German guilt, and how guilt relates to responsibility.) It's a whole other venue for me.

It's extremely important to find ways to work between these various struggles. The absence of a common grounding on the left has been very problematic. It's produced new forms of identity politics without developing a vocabulary for making connections. Unfortunately, there are people from the New Left in the United States, mainly white men who are feeling a little left out of things, who are more than happy to supply the ground. I know that some people have worried about Cultural Studies offering itself as an umbrella organisation for this kind of realignment within the academy. But it depends what they're talking about. Cultural studies in the United States is very different from what it is in Britain. It's often at some distance from the kind of global political analyses offered by Stuart Hall.

**RP: Perhaps we could return, briefly, to your Foucauldianism here. Implicit in what you have been saying (and it was explicit in your talk at the ICA), is a distinction between enabling and regressive practices and interpellations – although, of course, some practices might be both enabling and regressive at the same time. The question that immediately arises is: what's the criterion for the distinction? What are the grounds for affirming some norms and rejecting others?**

**Butler:** The trouble with the question of theoretical grounds is that it presupposes that we live outside of these norms, that we can witness them and engage them by a set of standards that are not inherent in the practices that we're analysing. What worries me most is that form of rationalist imperialism that thinks it has access to a set of principles extracted from practices, that it can

then apply to other practices. The Habermasian recourse to normative grounds is nothing other than an extraction of a contingent set of norms from practices – abstraction and decontextualisation – and then a re-application of those norms universally. It strikes me as circular and politically wrong. There's a really problematic circularity in that notion of normativity.

When I say 'enabling', I would admit, sure, there's a normative direction in my work, but I would hope that there is no normative ground. I don't think that in order to have a viable normative direction you need a ground. If I want to claim and describe certain ways of producing gender as restrictive or cruel, that entails that I have some more expansive or complex view of what gender might be. I'm willing to say that without filling in the content of what that's going to be, or prescribing an ideal norm for what that's going to be. I am in favour of opening up certain kinds of practices, be they sexual or gender practices, as sites of contestation and rearticulation. In one sense, that is enough for me. I see that as part of a democratic culture.

**RP: The refusal to rationalistically foreclose the results of conflict?**

**Butler:** Yes, and the opening up of spaces for a certain kind of democratic contestation, or more locally, for a contestation of gender.

**RP: But doesn't the very notion of a democratic contestation itself imply a norm of some kind of equality of input to the contest? That would be the Habermasian point, I suppose.**

**Butler:** Except that the Habermasians tend to impose an exclusionary norm in constructing the notion of the subject whose 'input' would count.

**RP: We'd like to end by asking you how you see the future of feminism.**

**Butler:** Catharine MacKinnon has become so powerful as the public spokesperson for feminism, internationally, that I think that feminism is going to have to start producing some powerful alternatives to what she's saying and doing – ones that can acknowledge her intellectual strength and not demonise her, because I do think there's an anti-feminist animus against her, which one should be careful not to encourage. Certainly, the paradigm of victimisation, the over-emphasis on pornography, the cultural insensitivity and the universalisation of 'rights' – all of that has to be countered by strong feminist positions.

What's needed is a dynamic and more diffuse conception of power, one which is committed to the difficulty of cultural translation as well as the need to rearticulate 'universality' in non-imperialist directions. This is difficult work and it's no longer viable to seek recourse to simple and paralysing models of structural oppression. But even here, in opposing a dominant conception of power in feminism, I am still 'in' or 'of' feminism. And it's this paradox that has to be worked, for there can be no pure opposition to power, only a recrafting of its terms from resources invariably impure.

Interviewed by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal  
London, October 1993