

Original Article

UNINTELLIGIBLE SUBJECTS: MAKING SENSE OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND SUBJECTIVITY AFTER BUTLER

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Abstract

This article responds to Lynne Segal's claims in "After Judith Butler: Identities, Who Needs Them?", concerning the shifts within Butler's work and her turn to questions of ethics, politics and identity. After considering, briefly, some of the main (materialist) critiques of Butler's work in recent years, I address the five shifts identified by Segal, suggesting that there are significant continuities across Butler's oeuvre and that, despite the adoption of a more ethically inflected language, it is still the circulation of cultural meanings that preoccupies her. The final third of the article, therefore, investigates Butler's continuing investment in a language of intelligibility and unintelligibility which represents the process of subjectivation as a process of "making sense of" oneself, and her tacit endorsement of the idea that "there are advantages to remaining less than intelligible" as a subject.

Keywords

Judith Butler; Lynne Segal; subjectivity; gender; queer; signification

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Introduction

Why might we say we are "after" Butler? And is this necessarily the denigration that Lynne Segal – in this issue – implies it is? There is a more positive reading of this: not that Judith Butler's work



has lost its relevance but, on the contrary, that any discussion of gender theory, of gender and sexual subjectivation, must proceed by first situating itself in relation to her ideas and arguments, even if only to take a different path to the one that we might call Butlerian. In positioning ourselves “after Butler”, we are asking where her work leaves us (and leads us) as subjects and as scholars. Where (and who) are we “after Butler”? How do we, as disparate bodies of scholars (for Butler’s work spills over into different disciplines and areas of research), orientate ourselves in relation to that body of work?

And in fact, this question that Segal raises of “what comes next” has been a pressing one for some time, as a number of theorists have begun to take issue with Butler’s ideas and, in many cases, to advocate a “return” to some other way(s) of reading gender, sexuality and subjectivity; this is more often a “return” than an entirely “new” way of thinking, as if the very act of “returning” confers upon the speaker an authority rooted in the past as well as an originality of perspective possible only in the present – for this is never simply a return, but always a return-with-a-difference. Primary among these recent “returns” are: a return to “materiality” (under which heading are collected new forms of ecofeminism, new corporeal feminisms and various “new materialisms”);¹ an invocation to discussions of the social as something more than “discourse”, as a site of political possibility rather than solely a “scene of constraint”, and a renewed attentiveness to socio-economic concerns and the subversive potential of subcultures;² and an interest in affect and becoming, under the influence of Deleuze.³ The turning away, in each case, is from what is felt to be a *reduction* of the experience of being a (gendered, sexed) subject to questions of discourse and signification (or perhaps, semiotics); in some instances, even the focus upon subjectivation (*assujettissement*) or upon identity is felt to be problematic or politically unproductive.

A couple of examples will demonstrate the apparent facility with which Butler’s work is positioned as the paradigm case of this allegedly pernicious discursive turn. In the introduction to a recent collection of essays, entitled *Material Feminisms* (2008), the editors – Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman – claim that “the guiding rule of procedure for most contemporary feminisms requires that one distance oneself as much as possible from the tainted realm of materiality by taking refuge within culture, discourse, and language”, and they allege that this “linguistic turn” has led to “an impasse” in feminist theory (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008, p. 1). In criticizing what they describe, somewhat reductively, as the “postmodern” approach to gender – and to reality more generally – they make a number of bold and contentious statements: “postmoderns are very uncomfortable with the concept of the real or the material”; “postmoderns have turned to the discursive pole as the exclusive source of the constitution of nature, society and reality” and postmoderns have “rejected” reality and “embraced” language (*ibid.*, pp. 2–3). Tellingly, they identify Butler as “perhaps the most notable feminist postmodern” and say that

she “is frequently criticized for her ‘loss’ of the material, specifically the materiality of the body”, although they give no examples of this (and notably distance themselves from such criticism in the way that they frame this assertion) (*ibid.*, p. 3). In fact, Butler’s work receives little close attention in the other essays in the collection and what analysis it does receive comes in the much more nuanced reading of Claire Colebrook, who avers that, “far from being simply discursive or linguistic, Butler’s critique of an appeal to life before mediation, recognition, performance, or system follows from poststructuralism’s critique of the language paradigm”; indeed, Colebrook laments the erroneous preoccupation with “the scandal of Butler’s linguisticism” (*ibid.*, pp. 68–69). Yet Butler is notable by her very absence in this collection, and she functions, tacitly, as the critical model (“linguisticism” or “social constructionism”) from which the editors (if not, necessarily, all of the contributors) are seeking to distance themselves.

Elsewhere, Butler has felt herself to be under attack for a different kind of “loss of the material” (or for what Segal describes as the “unswerving cultural focus” of her work); this is evident in her brief exchange with Nancy Fraser in the pages of *Social Text*. In “Merely Cultural”, Butler grapples with various allegations, including the claim “that the cultural focus of leftist politics has abandoned the materialist project of Marxism, failing to address questions of economics, equity and redistribution, and failing as well to situate culture in terms of a *systematic* understanding of social and economic modes of production” (Butler, 1997b, p. 265). Notably, she continues: “one more or less implicit presumption in some of these arguments is the notion that poststructuralism has thwarted Marxism” (*ibid.*). While she takes care not to identify the source(s) of these allegations, an implicit presumption of Butler’s own counter-argument is that she herself is their target. Her article, therefore, functions as a defence of the gender and queer studies of which she is, nominally, the figurehead, and as a contestation of the idea that the cultural and the material can be separated in the way that such attacks on her work presume.

Thus, she is critical of Fraser for the distinction she makes, in *Justice Interruptus*, between “redistribution” (an economic and political matter) and “recognition” (a cultural matter, broadly speaking), and for “construing lesbian and gay struggles as merely matters of cultural recognition” (a charge which Fraser subsequently denies). Butler demands, “is it possible to distinguish, even analytically, between a lack of cultural recognition and material oppression, when the very definition of legal ‘personhood’ is rigorously circumscribed by cultural norms that are indissociable from their material effects?” (Butler, 1997b, pp. 271, 273). This is the key point of her self-defence: that “cultural norms” are never “merely cultural”, because they are “indissociable” from the “material effects” that they produce. Fraser, while agreeing that the social and material effects of “misrecognition” are “all too real”, yet reaffirms the point that such misrecognition is “analytically distinct from, and conceptually

irreducible to, the injustice of maldistribution, although it *may* be accompanied by the latter”, and she proceeds to fault Butler’s conflation of the material and the economic (Fraser, 1997, p. 280). In maintaining and elucidating a distinction between the cultural and the *economic* and in asserting that “historicization represents a better approach to social theory than destabilization or deconstruction”, Fraser manages to strike out at the political limitations of Butler’s approach, even when that approach is not seen as entailing a wholesale loss of the material (Fraser, 1997, p. 287).

The above critiques raise the question of whether Butler’s work really does represent the apotheosis of what is variously figured as a cultural, discursive and/or linguistic turn in the late 20th century (implying thereby a lack of interest in, even a denial of, questions of the material, the socio-economic and affect). Certainly, it often figures as the example, the paradigm case, of such a turn. Or – as Segal’s reading of her suggests – has Butler’s thinking developed and altered in ways that contradict this critical account of her? I want to address these questions below, considering, moreover, whether this emphasis on signification is something that we really need to move away from so concerted. Does it in fact *preclude* an understanding of subjectivity as anything more than a parcel of meanings (meanings which it is beyond our agency as subjects to control)? Critiques of Butler are occasionally guilty of a simplification of her work and of poststructuralist thinking more generally – and indeed insufficient attention is paid to the particularities of Butler’s position which in fact might allow her to be seen as something other/more than a cardboard cut-out poststructuralist. In the Preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler herself contests the construal of poststructuralism in critical responses to her work:

Whereas some defenders of poststructuralist formalism express dismay at the avowedly “thematic” orientation it receives in works such as *Gender Trouble*, the critiques of poststructuralism within the cultural Left have expressed strong scepticism toward the claim that anything politically progressive can come of its premises. In both accounts, however, poststructuralism is considered something unified, pure, and monolithic. (Butler, 1999, p. ix)

There is a danger, too, that “Butler” (conceived as the sign of a certain way of doing gender politics and a certain way of understanding subject formation) acquires, fallaciously, the status of the “unified, pure, and monolithic”, a status which she rightly and resolutely shuns. Such a status allows her to receive the “adulation” of which Lynne Segal speaks, but it allows her also to become a kind of stalking-horse (one whose symbolic/paradigmatic power is vast) whose destruction operates as the necessary first premise of any “new” approach to gender, sexuality and subjectivity; more broadly, this represents a tendency to see an emphasis on the discursive construction of subjectivity as somehow *necessarily* excluding an awareness of the material factors that come into play in

the process of that construction. Is this really the case with Butler? I do not think so.

Nevertheless, I do want to go on to analyse the investment of Butler – and others – in a language of intelligibility and unintelligibility, which represents the (ongoing) process of subjectivation as a process of *making-sense-of* oneself and others, oneself for others, oneself through others; but which also seems to advocate a defiant refusal of (determinate) sense and of a bounded subjectivity which is seen as a regulatory tool, a site of the exchange of power, rather than a source of power and stable selfhood. The tacit politicizing of the position of unintelligibility in feminist and queer theory has much to teach us about contemporary conceptions of subjectivity. However, even though it may show up the flaws of a quite overbearing emphasis on signification within the poststructuralist inflected versions of those theories, it does not thereby signal the need for a rejection of all questions of signification as necessarily limiting and unproductive. Briefly, this is not an “either/or” debate, but there is a danger that it is becoming one. Segal’s article, in showing up the nuances, even the contradictions, in Butler’s work, serves as a useful warning against reductive readings and against factionalism. The focus on questions of intelligibility and recognition that we find even in Butler’s recent work, however (notably *Undoing Gender*), suggests that the distance she has travelled is not as great as Segal, in her generosity, would like it to be.

Which Butler are we talking about anyway? Segal’s five shifts

In the account of Butler that Lynne Segal offers in this issue, she identifies five shifts in Butler’s work that, she claims, serve to contest that view of her as “always at one with herself”. I want, now, to consider those five changes, briefly assessing the extent to which these represent genuine shifts of perspective – and the extent to which they might provide us with alternative Butlers, in response to that monolithic conception of her with which I have taken issue in the preceding section.

The first shift that Segal identifies is a shift “from primarily semiotic analysis to stressing the significance of the socio-cultural moment”, which suggests, in turn, a shift from abstraction to historical particularity. This is evident in the topicality of Butler’s discussions of mourning and violence, post-9/11, and certainly she has become more aware of, and more insistent upon, the idea that “we are dependent on what is outside of us, on a broader sociality” (Butler, 2004b, p. 32). Moreover, this “outside”, this “sociality”, is more amply documented in her recent work than previously: if, in *Gender Trouble*, it figures as a nebulous system of power relations too complex for the individual subject to grasp (never mind master), then in *Undoing Gender* the “constitutive sociality of the self” appears to proffer the possibility of some kind of “political

community” (*ibid.*, p. 19). Nevertheless, this emphasis on the “relationality” of the subject is not always historically specific, and nor is it wholly positive, for “the term ‘relationality’ sutures the rupture in the relation we seek to describe, a rupture that is constitutive of identity itself”, and such a “ruptured” subject provides an awkward basis for political solidarity and agency (*ibid.*).

The second shift elaborated by Segal is a shift from “political abstractions to ethical reasoning” and it is evident in the guiding concerns of Butler’s recent work: her preoccupations with grief and mourning, with the notion of a livable life, with kinship (its disparate forms and attendant responsibilities), with the question of what it is to lead an ethical life, and with violence and terror, in *Antigone’s Claim* (Butler, 2000), *Undoing Gender* (Butler, 2004b), *Precarious Life* (Butler, 2004a) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Butler, 2005).

Above all, this recent writing has as its basis a concern with “livability”: the ways in which certain norms (essentially norms of recognition) make life “unlivable” for certain people (making them abject rather than subjects), and the ways in which a resistance to those norms can involve an attempt at “greater livability” (Butler, 2004b, p. 1). As these discussions have become more and more obviously linked with questions of ethics, politics and human rights, some have seen this as a backing away from the post-humanist implications of her earlier writings, but Butler is adamant that her “rethinking of the human [...] does not entail a return to humanism”, but rather “the destruction and rearticulation of the human in the name of a more capacious and, finally, less violent world” (*ibid.*, pp. 13, 35). This more optimistic (or, perhaps, agential) tenor to her philosophy is visible also in a foregrounding of our obligations to others (or the other), and of the ways in which such relations (and obligations) serve to constitute our apparently separate selfhood; this is what Segal identifies in noting the third shift in Butler’s work, from a specific focus on gender and sexuality to a broader concern with “alterity and the face/place of the other” (and such a concern bears the imprint of Butler’s burgeoning interest in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt). As Butler explains it:

There is a more general conception of the human at work here, one in which we are, from the start, given over to the other, one in which we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself, and by virtue of our embodiment, given over to an other: this makes us vulnerable to violence, but also to another range of touch, a range that includes the eradication of our being at the one end, and the physical support for our lives, at the other. (Butler, 2004b, p. 23)

The emphasis has shifted, then, from a quite negative impression of the paucity of individual agency, to a more hopeful and ethical view of collectivity and

responsibility. Nevertheless, the opacity of the subject and its status as a social construction still preoccupy Butler; as she notes in her reading of Adorno's moral philosophy in *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

[T]here is no "I" that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no "I" that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms, which, being norms, have a social character that exceeds a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning. (Butler, 2005, p. 7)

And thus, "When the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration" (Butler, 2005, pp. 7–8). The nature and terms of this "implication in a social temporality", and the "conditions" of the subject's "emergence", have formed the main focus of all of Butler's work; in this sense, she has been more resolute, less changeable than Segal perhaps implies. The difference, if there is one, is that this "implication" now carries very definite ethical responsibilities and commitments. But the continuities are also evident – indeed there are striking similarities between Butler's account of the subject's relation to power in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Butler, 1997a) and her discussion of the subject's relation to morality in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Butler, 2005). In both instances, she meditates on how the subject must seek to establish a relationship to some set of norms or power relations which have played a significant role in the very inauguration of that subject; in both instances, therefore, the relationship is an ambivalent one, but not therefore one in which the subject is utterly stripped of agency. Segal is right, then, to defend Butler against her critics, for this insistence on the *impossibility* of subjective autonomy functions as part of her explanation of the *possibility* of collectivity and her noting of the increasingly pressing calls of moral responsibility. As she says, although "the 'I' is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence", nevertheless "this dispossession does not mean that we have lost the subjective ground for ethics. On the contrary, it may well be the condition for moral inquiry" (Butler, 2005, p. 8). If the language of morality represents a shift in her work, the emphasis on dispossession is a more familiar feature.

The fourth shift that Segal notes in Butler's work is a shift from a focus on "exteriority and performativity to a more psychodynamic interest in interiority and [...] the early years of life". There is, undoubtedly, a greater attention to psychoanalysis (particularly the work of Jean Laplanche) in Butler's more recent writings, but the move from exteriority to interiority is, as ever, complicated by Butler's conception of the meanings of both. To describe this as a shift is to imagine a clearer distinction between interior and exterior than Butler in fact allows and it is also to misread her conception of "interiority", which is arguably as performative, as *social*, as that which is "exterior" to the subject.

Nevertheless, there is a definite attempt to move beyond the perceived limitations of a specifically Foucaultian social constructionism in *The Psychic Life of Power* as she works to bring together a “theory of power” and a “theory of the psyche”, provoking a meeting (if not exactly a rapprochement) between Foucault and psychoanalysis (Butler, 1997a, p. 3). In confirmation of Segal’s analysis, she examines the links between childhood dependency and adult, political subjection, claiming that “this situation of primary dependency [in childhood] conditions the political formation and regulation of subjects and becomes the means of their subjection” (*ibid.*, p. 7). She is quite critical of Foucault, arguing that he “is notoriously taciturn on the topic of the psyche” and that “an account of subjection [...] must be traced in the turns of psychic life” (*ibid.*, p. 18). However, she takes pains to complicate this very distinction between interior and exterior, psychic and social:

Is the norm first “outside”, and does it then enter into a pre-given psychic space, understood as an interior theatre of some kind? Or does the internalization of the norm contribute to the production of internality? Does the norm, having become psychic, involve not only the interiorization of the norm, but the interiorization of the psyche? I argue that this process of internalization *fabricates the distinction between interior and exterior life*, offering us a distinction between the psychic and the social that differs significantly from an account of the psychic internalization of norms. (Butler, 1997a, p. 19; italics in original)

It is not simply the case, then, that norms become internalized, but rather that norms work to produce the domain of interiority in particular ways. The experience of “psychic subjection” is not merely the “[reinstatement of] social power”, for the psychic norm is itself “formative” – it does not merely repeat the social norm. Nevertheless, the “social operation” of the norm is *prior* to the “psychic operation” of the norm (Butler, 1997a, p. 21). So Butler retains her constructivist worldview here, asserting the priority of the social, while still seeking to explain “psychic subjection” as more than derivative, as “a specific modality of subjection” which “does not simply reflect or represent broader relations of social power – even as it remains importantly tied to them” (*ibid.*, pp. 21–22).

And in fact, comments made in 1999 (i.e., after the publication of *The Psychic Life of Power*) suggest that she has not made the shift towards an “interest in interiority” in quite the manner that Segal alleges. In the preface to a new edition of *Gender Trouble*, she asserts that,

Although I would deny that all of the internal world of the psyche is but an effect of a stylized set of acts, I continue to think that it is a significant theoretical mistake to take the “internality” of the psychic world for granted. Certain features of the world [...] do become “internal” features of the self,

but they are transformed through that interiorization, and that inner world [...] is constituted precisely as a consequence of the interiorizations that a psyche performs. (Butler, 1999, p. xvi)

So, although the “internal world of the psyche” is not wholly performative and socially produced, that world’s very construction as “internal” has a normative dimension to it (and is, precisely, a *construction*).

The final shift that Segal details in the evolution of Butler’s thinking is from “a rejection of identities” to some kind of “identity politics”, an “embrace” of “several” identities. We might question, however, whether Butler ever held such a strong position as the outright *rejection* of identities. Her comments on the subject over the years are in fact remarkably consistent and they suggest that she has *neither* rejected outright *nor* embraced unequivocally the lure of identity politics; indeed, in the decisive conclusion to *Gender Trouble*, “From Parody to Politics”, she contests “the foundationalist reasoning of identity politics” and the notion of “a prediscursive ‘I’”, without thereby ruling out all appeals to identity, which should be understood instead as “a *practice*, and as a signifying practice” (Butler, 1999, pp. 194, 195, 198). Writing in 1991, in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, she asserts:

I’m not at ease with “lesbian theories, gay theories”, for as I’ve argued elsewhere, identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies. (Butler, 1991, pp. 13–14)

In a typical series of moves, Butler here rehearses the familiar Foucaultian argument that identity categories facilitate the regulation of the individual subject, serving as a conduit of power, yet recognizes the possible strategic value of the (considered, conditional) adoption of identity signifiers, before defiantly throwing the intelligibility of those signifiers into doubt (and suggesting that this compromised intelligibility works to frustrate the operation of those “regulatory regimes”).

In “Merely Cultural”, Butler in fact intimates that what passes for (and is criticized as) identity politics is actually much more than this, as she challenges the idea that the “new social movements” (those concerned with race, gender and sexuality, for example) “*are reducible to their identitarian formations*” (Butler, 1997b, p. 268; italics in original). If we accept the claim of that article regarding the interpenetration of the cultural and the material, then what Butler is acceding to, in her later work, is not exactly “identity politics”. Writing in 1999, she echoes the sentiments of “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in claiming that “the mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of

politicization always remains threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes”, while insisting that this “is no reason not to use, and be used, by identity” (Butler, 1999, pp. xxvii–xxviii). This apparently voluntarist approach to identity is, naturally, complicated by the ambivalent status of subjective agency in Butler’s philosophy (an ambivalence evident in that poorly punctuated phrase “use, and be used by”) but the crucial point is that this is no recourse to an essential identity but rather something much more fraught, tactical and equivocal.

In any case, as Butler has more recently clarified, queer theory is *not* simply anti-identity politics, rather it is “opposed to the unwanted legislation of identity”, it positions itself against “those who would regulate identities or establish epistemological claims of priority for those who make claims to certain kinds of identities” (Butler, 2004b, p. 7). Butler herself makes no such claims to epistemological priority or certainty in her occasional invocation of identity. In the light of these comments, we can review Segal’s claim. Says Segal: “it is *as a Jew*, that Butler is nowadays working for peace in the Middle East. She quite explicitly foregrounds this identity in her claims to authority in her involvements in this political debate”. Yet I am not sure that this is the embracing of identity politics that Segal takes it to be. In fact, Butler’s very foregrounding of the fact that she is doing something “*as a Jew*”, emphasizes the extent to which this is a strategic claiming of identity and thus a contingent, inessential, temporary one, donned to lend her authority; a performative identity, in fact. Segal’s phrase “narratives of self-making” is appropriate here, but surely it was ever thus for Butler?

In concluding, Segal avers, persuasively, that “political allegiances [...] are lived as forms of identity” and expresses her hope that “Butler would be in agreement with these thoughts on the ties between identities and politics”. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler certainly reaffirms her political commitments and hints too at this “tie” of which Segal speaks, in claiming that, “to live is to live a life politically, in relation to power, in relation to others, in the act of assuming responsibility for a collective future” (Butler, 2004b, p. 39). Even where Butler has been more obviously antagonistic towards (foundationalist, essentialist) notions of identity and subjectivity, this has not thereby vitiated her commitment to collective politics, even if the routes to collectivity have been consistently muddied. Even her determinedly “critical evaluation of subject formation” in *The Psychic Life of Power*, can, she claims, help us to understand “the double binds to which our emancipatory efforts occasionally lead without, in consequence, evacuating the political” and she looks for ways in which “political agency”, despite its basis in “complicity”, may yet “do more than reiterate the conditions of subordination” (Butler, 1997a, pp. 29–30).

The “conditions of subordination”, as Butler figures them, are, however, closely tied to questions of intelligibility and recognition. Such questions – and her nominal answers to them – hint at routes out of subordination, at the

possibilities of subjective agency (which would seem to confirm Segal's positive reading of Butler's political potential), while yet revealing her continuing focus on questions of meaning and signification and, perhaps, therefore, her political limitations.

The politics and practice of unintelligibility

"There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible", Butler writes in the introduction to *Undoing Gender* (Butler, 2004b, p. 3). While the accusation of unintelligibility is one that has been levelled at her by numerous critics and commentators throughout her career (not least in her winning of *Philosophy and Literature's* "bad writing" prize in 1998; Homi Bhabha came second), intelligibility is also a central theme within her accounts of gender, sex and subjectivity, thanks to the connections made in her work between intelligibility, recognition, regulation and normativity. Witness, for example, the qualifier that follows her statement on the advantages of unintelligibility, quoted above. Such an unintelligibility is *only* an advantage, "if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms", and where "recognition" is understood as "a site of power by which the human is differentially produced" (Butler, 2004b, pp. 2–3). Unintelligibility thus becomes a political position of sorts and the locus of what little agency remains for us within a Butlerian worldview. The "gender trouble" which she seeks to identify and inspire, in the book of that title, comprises precisely an attempt "to expose the limits and regulatory aims of [the] domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder" (Butler, 1999, p. 24). This "disorder" amounts to a refusal to conform to "norms of cultural intelligibility" and, by extension, a *refusal of intelligibility itself* conceived as a process of normalization and naturalization.

In fact this is not unrelated to the question of style in her work, indeed she even employs it as a defence of the awkward grammar of *Gender Trouble*, asserting that, "Neither grammar nor style are politically neutral. Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself" (Butler, 1999, p. xix). She proceeds to cast doubt upon anything that announces itself as lucidity:

What travels under the sign of "clarity", and what would be the price of failing to deploy a certain critical suspicion when the arrival of lucidity is announced? Who devises the protocols of "clarity" and whose interests do they serve? What is foreclosed by the insistence on parochial standards of transparency as requisite for all communication? What does "transparency" keep obscure? (Butler, 1999, p. xx)

What transparency “keeps obscure” are, of course the power relations and structures that constitute us as subjects or – more pressingly – refuse certain individuals the status of subjecthood. Questions of literary style aside, Butler’s concern with intelligibility is, then, deployed most forcefully in her analyses of subject formation and the norms that govern our understanding of humanity:

To be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject, as a possible or potential subject, but to be unreal is something else again. To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always *as if you were* human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favour. (Butler, 2004b, p. 30)

So, if you are “unreal” you are, by definition, unintelligible, and you are not a subject. Butler’s argument about intelligibility and recognition proceeds, in *Undoing Gender*, from Spinoza’s idea that “every human being seeks to persist in his own being”, to Hegel’s claim “that desire is always a desire for recognition”; she combines these in her own suggestion that, “to persist in one’s own being is only possible on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition. If we are not recognizable, [...] then it is not possible to persist in one’s own being” (Butler, 2004b, p. 31). So some form of intelligibility is a condition of possibility for subjecthood, is necessary in order to attain recognition and “persist in one’s own being”; in *The Psychic Life of Power* she expresses this slightly differently in the claim that “the subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency” (Butler, 1997a, p. 11). The norms of recognition (and, therefore, of intelligibility) are of course social and cultural norms, which is to say that they are located outside the subject (but also inside – to the extent that they constitute that subject’s conditions of possibility). “Personhood”, then, implies a kind of intelligibility, while intelligibility in turn implies a compliance with certain social and sexual norms, a *propriety* (with the observance of necessary boundaries which that term connotes). Whatever the apparent abstraction of her work, such concerns do gesture towards the realities of cultural, social and political marginalization: the consequences of unintelligibility are real (material) enough.

Yet Butler offers a critique of the regime of intelligibility – for intelligibility is, crucially, maintained by, even synonymous with, a certain violence. So, in *Bodies That Matter* she asks: “What are the constraints by which bodies are materialized as ‘sexed’, and how are we to understand the ‘matter’ of sex, and of bodies more generally, as *the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural*

intelligibility?” (Butler, 1993, pp. xi–xii, my emphasis). Intelligibility, in the more ethically inflected accounts of it that she offers in her recent work, is also a question of justice: “This relationship, between intelligibility and the human is an urgent one; it carries a certain theoretical urgency, precisely at those points where the human is encountered at the limits of intelligibility itself. I would like to suggest that this interrogation has something important to do with justice” (Butler, 2004b, p. 58).

This interrogation of intelligibility that Butler seems to be demanding of us – what does this amount to? What happens if we refuse to “reproduce intelligibility” (without thereby eschewing it altogether)? It seems to me that Butler is endorsing, as a kind of third way, the position of the *unintelligible subject*. As an unintelligible subject, you shift the terms and criteria of intelligibility, test the limits of these, without thereby becoming utterly intelligible and, therefore, utterly assimilated, compliant and subject to regulation. So you are not “unreal” (unintelligible, not a subject), nor are you fully intelligible (a docile subject). Ultimately, Butler is keen to retain “the tensions that beset the most fundamental categories we require” and the experience of “knowing unknowingness at the core of what we know” (Butler, 2004b, p. 39). When she argues, with reference to *Gender Trouble*, that its “positive normative task [...] is to insist upon the extension of [...] legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal, and unintelligible”, this is an extension and expansion of “legitimacy”, not a rendering intelligible (Butler, 1999, p. xxv). In fact, this very extension of legitimacy to potentially unreadable bodies, desires and subject positions, actually serves to disrupt the viability of intelligibility as an aim and as an organizing factor of everyday life.

Her “ethical query” (as it has become, by the time of *Undoing Gender*) concerns how we might “encounter the difference that calls our grids of intelligibility into question without trying to foreclose the challenge that the difference delivers?” (Butler, 2004b, p. 35). The ethical response to the unknown and apparently unintelligible Other is one which “lives with its unknowingness about the Other in the face of the Other, since sustaining the bond that the question opens is finally more valuable than knowing in advance what holds us in common” (*ibid.*). This living with “unknowingness” comprises her resistance to the terms of intelligibility. The “cultural translation” that Butler recommends is, again, not simply about making certain currently abjected lives and subjects intelligible, but instead subjects “our most fundamental categories” to a process of “resignification” where necessary (Butler, 2004b, p. 38). The implication is that this resignification will *not* result in a final and incontestable intelligibility; it “is not a translation between two languages that stay enclosed, distinct, unified”; in fact, the “apprehension” of one language by another “will constitute a loss, a disorientation” (*ibid.*).

Butler’s analyses of intelligibility and recognition acquire particular focus and specificity in relation to transgender and queer identities, so I want to turn to

these now, by way of elucidation. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of trans identities which appear to challenge our established structures of gender and sexuality. Intelligibility is an issue here, for “coherent gender” is “a presupposition of humanness” (Butler, 2004b, p. 58); to be “unintelligible” is to be denied the status of the human – but also to escape (to some degree) the forms of regulation that produce our identities. In *Bodies That Matter* she writes of those “abjected or delegitimated bodies” which “fail to count as ‘bodies’” (Butler, 1993, p. 15) – as she sets out the consequences of a refusal of “recognition” to those who are figured as unintelligible in their bodies, genders or sexualities. So trans identities are figured as radical in their social/public unintelligibility; such unintelligibility makes them apparently “unlivable”, but also then presents an opportunity for the challenging of gender and sexual norms, by revealing the inadequacy, insufficiency and arbitrariness of those norms.

Writing on the case of David Reimer (who was born male, raised as a girl following a serious injury to his penis during circumcision, and who subsequently chose to re-adopt a male gender in his teens) Butler implies that a position of unintelligibility is, potentially, a position of power:

It is precisely the ways in which he is not fully recognizable, fully disposable, fully categorizable, that his humanness emerges. And this is important because we might ask that he enter into intelligibility in order to speak and to be known, but what he does instead, through his speech, is to offer a critical perspective on the norms that confer intelligibility itself. He shows, we might say, that there is an understanding to be had that exceeds the norms of intelligibility itself. And he achieves this “outside”, we might speculate, by refusing the interrogations that besiege him, reversing their terms, and learning the ways in which he might escape. If he renders himself unintelligible to those who seek to know and capture his identity, this means that something about him is intelligible outside of the framework of accepted intelligibility. (Butler, 2004b, p. 73)

Reimer then effects an “escape” from categorization, from surveillance and from power, to some extent – although we should bear in mind the conditional, hypothetical way in which Butler frames these suggestions (“we might say”, “we might speculate”). What David Reimer risks (but also enjoys) is “desubjugation” (Butler asks: “is he a subject? How will we know?”). She concludes that: “This does not mean that David becomes unintelligible and, therefore, without value to politics; rather he emerges *at the limits of intelligibility*, offering a perspective on the variable ways in which norms circumscribe the human” (Butler, 2004b, p. 74, my emphasis).

Butler’s work, I have suggested, raises a number of questions concerning: what counts as intelligibility within our culture and why; what the social and political effects of unintelligibility might be; and how we might profitably use

this notion of “unintelligibility” as a platform or basis for radical social and political action. But is the “unintelligible” here too negative (and too capacious) a category? Do all bodies and genders become “unintelligible” when we look into them more closely? Is an encouragement of unintelligibility as a resistance to gender and sexual norms an unwitting consolidation of one’s position as marginalized and incoherent other? As Kathleen Lennon argues, it is problematic to place the transgender person by default always in this position “in the vanguard of a public political activism” (Lennon, 2006, p. 28) (and this is perhaps particularly problematic in the case of David Reimer, whose experience is quite different from the majority of transgender stories). Sometimes embracing one’s unintelligibility may not be possible, or even desirable; a certain “accommodation with public forms of intelligibility” may be necessary (*ibid.*). Lennon develops a model of “mutual intelligibility within everyday practices” as the basis of livability, in contradistinction to Butler’s idea of “recognition under some general norm” (*ibid.*). She concludes that:

Explicit transgendered activism of the kind that Butler endorses, as well as lots of less obvious everyday activities, expand the expressive possibilities of differently shaped bodies. But for this to work such activism and activities have to take place in contexts in which they can be found intelligible. In other contexts body modification may be the only route to such intelligibility. (Lennon, 2006, p. 34)

And in fact, although Butler is critical of the imposition of “a model of coherent gendered life that demeans the complex ways in which gendered lives are crafted and lived” that occurs in response to cases of “gender dysphoria”, nevertheless she acknowledges that the strategic recourse to such a “coherence” (i.e., intelligibility) may be necessary for certain individuals (Butler, 2004b, p. 5).

Intelligibility – its presence or absence – is also a key factor in our understanding of “queerness”, queer theory and queer activism, fields strongly influenced by Butler’s work. In a recent paper delivered at Roehampton University, Judith Halberstam speculated on the “anti-social turn” in queer theory, something exemplified in the “no future” thesis of Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory & the Death Drive* (Edelman, 2004), which pits itself against “the regulatory fantasy of reproductive futurism”, and also in the figuring of queerness as anti-communitarian and non-redemptive by Leo Bersani, in *Homos* (Bersani, 1995). It is, says Halberstam, a “crucial shift in thinking away from projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation and towards what can only be called an anti-social, negative and anti-relational theory of sexuality”, where sex is seen as “a death drive that undoes the self, releases the self from the drive for mastery and coherence and resolution” (Halberstam, 2007).⁴ Is this, as Halberstam suggests, the emergence of a “politics of negativity” within queer studies (something to which she is not

in fact opposed)? Halberstam's own response was to call for an uncovering of the less palatable queer histories that she feels have been excised from the more celebratory accounts of queerness (e.g., connections between Nazism and gay male sexuality in the 1920s and after); this would be part of a proper embracing of the Foucaultian account of sexuality, according to Halberstam, rather than a blind attempt to figure homosexuality as (always and everywhere) a kind of resistance to normalization and regulation. But this politics of negativity can also, I think, be seen as part of the more general insistence in much contemporary queer theory (including Butler, Judith Roof and Eve Sedgwick) on queerness as a defiant (and subversive) *refusal to mean*, to make sense, to add up. So Sedgwick, in *Tendencies*, claims that:

Queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically. (Sedgwick, 1994, p. 8)

A distinct, but coterminous, conceptualization of "queer" is evident in Sara Ahmed's recent book, *Queer Phenomenology* (2007), where she figures queerness as a potentially radical form of disorientation; Ahmed claims that she is using "queer" "as a way of describing what is 'oblique' or 'off line'" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 161). As Sinfield comments, with reference to Bersani, Edelman, Dollimore and Halberstam: "It is enough for a trend: I see a reassertion of a defiant anti-assimilationism, rendered ineluctable through an attempted embrace of the so-called death drive" (Sinfield, 2005, p. 51). If so, as one questioner asked Halberstam following her talk, how can that politics of negativity/unintelligibility/disorientation, with its apparent denial of consensus, coherence and hope, offer a basis for queer activism? It is not surprising then, that Ahmed is cautious in the claims that she makes, conceding that "I want us to think about how queer politics might *involve* disorientation, without legislating disorientation as a politics. It is not that disorientation is always radical", and insisting that "it is important not to make disorientation an obligation or a responsibility for those who identify as queer" (2007, pp. 158, 177).

If these formulations of queerness as radical unintelligibility are part of Judith Butler's legacy, they are not the whole of it. For, as Segal suggests, Butler's language *has* altered, and what began as a concern with intelligibility is perhaps now more definitely a concern with livability (although the two, as I hope I have shown, are not utterly distinct). In 1999 Butler claimed that her work was still guided by "the following kinds of questions: what will and will not constitute an intelligible life, and how [...] presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as the 'human' and the 'livable'" (Butler, 1999, p. xxiii). Arguably, this is still the case, in 2008. The shift in her terminology is visible here within a single sentence, but so are

the continuities between her past and present work: these are still questions of the force and circulation of cultural meanings, questions concerning our signifying practices, but they are now being formulated in terms (livability, “the human”), which bespeak an ethical commitment less obviously to the fore in her earlier writings.

So if Butler is not quite doing what Segal suggests and “undoing” her earlier work, the terms and preoccupations of that work are shifting. These shifts are perhaps best viewed, not as an evolution, a teleological movement towards something that will constitute an undoing of the gender trouble that she previously sought to sow, but rather an indication of the ways in which her philosophy functions brilliantly (and occasionally maddeningly) via proleptic and analeptic movements of doing and undoing – just as it always has done.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, Alaimo and Hekman (2008), which includes contributions from Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, and Claire Colebrook, among others. See also the “corporeal feminism”, which perhaps began with Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (Grosz, 1994), and which includes Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price (eds.), *Vital Signs* (Shildrick and Price, 1999), and Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (Braidotti, 1994) and *Metamorphoses* (Braidotti, 2002), and Braidotti and Nina Lykke (eds.), *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs* (Braidotti and Lykke, 1996). For a more obviously politically inflected interpretation of a material feminism, see Stella Sandford’s “Sexmat, Revisited” (Sandford, 2007) and Alison Stone’s “The Incomplete Materialism of French Materialist Feminism” (Stone, 2007).
- 2 For politicized readings of sexuality which, tacitly or otherwise, position themselves against poststructuralist readings of a Foucaultian or Butlerian nature, see, for example, Alan Sinfield’s writing on gay subcultures in *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-War Britain* (Sinfield, 1989) and *Gay and After* (Sinfield, 1999), and David Alderson’s work on post-gay culture in “Not everyone knows fuck all about Foucault: Will Self’s *Dorian* and Post-Gay Culture”, (Alderson, 2005). See also: Mandy Merck (Merck, 2004), David T. Evans (Evans, 1993); Rosemary Hennessy (Hennessy, 2000); and Harriett Bradley and Steve Fenton, (Bradley and Fenton, 1999).
- 3 For example, in the recent work of Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, respectively. This Deleuzian influence was strongly evident in their respective papers given at the University of Manchester in 2007–2008 as part of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts’ series on Sexuality, Gender and the Body (Braidotti, 2007; Grosz, 2008). See also Grosz’s two recent books, *Time Travels* (Grosz, 2005b) and *The Nick of Time* (Grosz, 2005a).

- 4 For a record of an earlier discussion of the “anti-social” turn in Queer Theory, involving Robert Caserio, Lee Edelman and others, see Caserio *et al.* (2006). See also Alan Sinfield’s review of Edelman (Sinfield, 2005).

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