

Judith Butler

FROM: *BODIES THAT MATTER: ON THE DISCURSIVE LIMITS OF 'SEX'*
(London and New York: Routledge, 1993)

IS THERE A WAY TO link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender? And how does the category of 'sex' figure within such a relationship? Consider first that sexual difference is often invoked as an issue of material differences. Sexual difference, however, is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices. Further, to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes sexual difference. The category of 'sex' is from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a 'regulatory ideal'. In this sense, then, 'sex' not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, 'sex' is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, 'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. But how, then, does the notion of gender performativity relate to this conception of materialization? In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act', but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. What will, I hope, become clear in what follows is that the regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative. [...]

Performativity as citationality

When, in Lacanian parlance, one is said to assume a 'sex', the grammar of the phrase creates the expectation that there is a 'one' who, upon waking, looks up and deliberates on which 'sex' it will assume today, a grammar in which 'assumption' is quickly assimilated to the notion of a highly reflective choice. But if this 'assumption' is *compelled* by a regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality, one which reiterates itself through the forcible production of 'sex', then the 'assumption' of sex is constrained from the start. And if there is *agency*, it is to be

found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation and identification with those normative demands. The forming, crafting, bearing, circulation, signification of that sexed body will not be a set of actions performed in compliance with the law; on the contrary, they will be a set of actions mobilized by the law, the citational accumulation and dissimulation of the law that produced material effects, the lived necessity of those effects as well as the lived contestation of that necessity.

Performativity is thus not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the convention of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity). Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names (Austin, 1955, 1961: esp. 233–52). According to the biblical rendition of the performative, i.e., 'Let there be light!', it appears that it is by virtue of *the power of a subject or its will* that a phenomenon is named into being. In a critical reformation of the performative, Derrida makes clear that this power is not the function of an originating will, but is always derivative:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'? ...in such a typology, the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance [*l'énonciation*].
(Derrida, 1988:18)

To what extent does discourse gain the authority to bring about what it names through citing the conventions of authority? And does a subject appear as the author of its discursive effects to the extent that the citational practice by which she/he is conditioned and mobilized remains unmarked? Indeed, could it be that the production of the subject as originator of her/his effects is precisely a consequence of this dissimulated citationality? Further, if a subject comes to be through a subjection of the norms of sex, a subjection which requires an assumption of the norms of sex, can we read that 'assumption' as precisely a modality of this kind of citationality? In other words, the norm of sex takes hold to the extent that it is 'cited' as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations that it compels. And how it is that we might read the 'citing' of the norms of sex as the process of approximating or 'identifying with' such norms? Further, to what extent within psychoanalysis is the sexed body secured through identificatory practices governed by regulatory schemas? Identification is used here not an imitative activity by which a conscious being models itself after another; on the contrary, identification is the assimilating passion by which an ego first emerges (Borch-Jacobsen, 1988). Freud argues that 'the ego is first and foremost a bodily

ego', that this ego is, further, 'a projection of a surface' (Freud, 1960:16), what we might redescribe as an imaginary morphology. Moreover, I would argue, this imaginary morphology is not a presocial or presymbolic operation, but is itself orchestrated through regulatory schemas that produce intelligible morphological possibilities. These regulatory schemas are not timeless structures, but historically revisable criteria of intelligibility which produce and vanquish bodies that matter. If the formulation of a bodily ego, a sense of stable contour, and the fixing of spatial boundary, is achieved through identificatory practices, and if psychoanalysis documents the hegemonic workings of those identifications, can we then read psychoanalysis for the inculcation of the heterosexual matrix at the level of bodily morphogenesis? What Lacan calls the 'assumption' or 'accession' to the symbolic law can be read as a kind of *citing* of the law, and so offers an opportunity to link the question of the materialization of 'sex' with the reworking of performativity as citationality. Although Lacan claims that the symbolic law has a semi-autonomous status prior to the assumption of sexed positions by a subject, these normative positions, i.e., the 'sexes', are only known through the approximations that they occasion. The force and necessity of these norms ('sex' as a symbolic function is to be understood as a kind of commandment or injunction) is thus functionally *dependent* on the approximation and citation of the law; the law without its approximation is no law or, rather, it remains a governing law only for those who would affirm it on the basis of religious faith. If 'sex' is assumed in the same way that a law is cited[...]then 'the law of sex' is repeatedly fortified and idealized as the law only to the extent that it is reiterated as the law, produced as the law, the anterior and inapproximable ideal, by the very citations it is said to command. Reading the meaning of 'assumption' in Lacan as citation, the law is no longer given in a fixed form *prior* to its citation, but is produced through citation as that which precedes and exceeds the mortal approximations enacted by the subject. In this way, the symbolic law in Lacan can be subject to the same kind of critique that Nietzsche formulated of the notion of God: the power attributed to this prior and ideal power is derived and deflected from the attribution itself.¹ [...]And though the symbolic appears to be a force that cannot be contravened without psychosis, the symbolic ought to be rethought as a series of normativizing injunctions that secure the borders of sex through the threat of psychosis, abjection, psychic unlivability. And further, that this 'law' can only remain a law to the extent that it compels the differentiated citations and approximations called 'feminine' and 'masculine'. The presumption that the symbolic law of sex enjoys a separable ontology prior and autonomous to its assumption is contravened by the notion that the citation of the law is the very mechanism of its production and articulation. What is 'forced' by the symbolic, then, is a citation of its law that reiterates and consolidates the ruse of its own force. What would it mean to 'cite' the law to produce it differently, to 'cite'

the law in order to reiterate and coopt its power, to expose the heterosexual matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity?

The process of that sedimentation of what we might call *materialization* will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that

establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the 'I'.

In this sense, the agency denoted by the performativity of 'sex' will be directly counter to any notion of a voluntarist subject who exists quite apart from the regulatory norms which she/he opposes. The paradox of subject-ivation (*assujettissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterate or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.

As a result of this reformulation of performativity, (a) gender performativity cannot be theorized apart from the forcible and reiterative practice of regulatory sexual regimes; (b) the account of agency conditioned by those very regimes of discourse/power cannot be conflated with voluntarism or individualism, much less with consumerism, and in no way presupposes a choosing subject; (c) the regime of

heterosexuality operates to circumscribe and contour the 'materiality' of sex, and that 'materiality' is formed and sustained through and as a materialization of regulatory norms that are in part those of heterosexual hegemony; (d) the materialization of norms requires those identifications by which norms are assumed or appropriated, and these identifications precede and enable the formation of a subject, but are not, strictly speaking, performed by a subject; and (e) the limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as 'bodies'. If the materiality of sex is demarcated in discourse, then this demarcation will produce a domain of excluded and delegitimated 'sex'. Hence, it will be as important to think about how and to what end bodies are constructed as it will be to think about how and to what end bodies are *not* constructed and, further, to ask after how bodies which fail to materialize provide the necessary 'outside', if not the necessary support, for the bodies which, in materializing the norm, qualify as bodies that matter. [...]

[Butler suggests how those 'outside' the heterosexualizing norm might be made legitimate:]

I suggest that the contentious practices of 'queerness' might be understood not only as an example of citational politics, but as a specific reworking of abjection into political agency that might explain why 'citationality' has contemporary political promise. The public assertion of 'queerness' enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy. [...] This is the politicization of abjection in an effort to

rewrite the history of the term, and to force it into a demanding resignification. Such a strategy, I suggest, is crucial to creating the kind of community in which surviving with AIDS becomes more possible, in which queer lives become legible, valuable, worthy of support, in which passion, injury, grief, aspiration become recognized without fixing the terms of that recognition in yet another conceptual order of lifelessness and rigid exclusion. [...]

To what extent is 'sex' a constrained production, a forcible effect, one which sets the limits to what will qualify as a body by regulating the terms by which bodies are and are not sustained? My purpose here is to understand how what has been foreclosed or banished from the proper domain of 'sex' —where that domain is secured through a heterosexualizing imperative —might at once be produced as a troubling return, not only as an *imaginary* contestation that effects a failure in the workings of the inevitable law, but as an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all.

Note

1 Nietzsche argues that the ideal of God was produced '[i]n the same measure' as a human sense of failure and wretchedness, and that the production of God was, indeed, the idealization which instituted and reinforced that wretchedness; see Nietzsche, 1969: section 20.