

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

**Feminism and Deconstruction: Towards a Theory of Embodied  
Subjectivity**

Being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the University of Hull

by

Gillian Ann Jagger BA (hons.) (CNAA), MA (York)

October 1999

*For Victoria, Richard, Emma and Joanne  
and especially for David for always being there*

# Contents

Acknowledgements	<i>i</i>
Introduction and Synopsis	1
<b>PART 1 Feminism and Deconstruction</b>	<b>13</b>
1. Derrida, Deconstruction and <i>Différance</i>	14
2. Feminism and Deconstruction: Anti- Essentialism and the Politics of Female Subjectivity	56
<b>PART 2 The Body</b>	<b>104</b>
3. Subjectivity, Sexual Difference and Corporeality	107
4. Derrida and Foucault: 'Writing' and Discourse	147
5. Judith Butler: Performance and Performativity	186
Conclusion	244
Comprehensive Bibliography	255

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the University of Hull for a three year bursary in the form of a *University of Hull Award* that enabled me to embark on this project in the first place. I would like to thank Kathleen Lennon for her shrewd insight and inspiring support and above all her ability to pick up my spirits and set me back on track at the low times. Thanks also go to the School of Cultural Studies, Leeds Metropolitan University for valuable support in the last few weeks which gave me the time to complete.

I want to thank my mother whose early support was vital and my children, for their forbearance as they have become used to me spending all my time in front of a computer, and especially Emma whose technical help made all the difference. Above all I want to thank David for his unswerving support which has been vital to the completion of this project, as indeed all my projects.



## Introduction and Synopsis

Subjectivity, corporeality and sexual difference: the question of the relationship between these three aspects of human being is perhaps currently the most fundamental issue as far as feminist theory is concerned. The sex/gender distinction is increasingly problematised but there is still little agreement about the relationship between sex, sexuality and gender and the role of the body in all this; or about the significance of these factors for the frameworks we think in and the practices we engage in. However, although there is much disagreement about precisely how to think these relationships, there is at least some consensus that it involves rethinking the body, in its corporeality, beyond the various dualisms (e.g. mind/body, nature/culture, subject/object) that have structured much contemporary thinking on these matters and that have in the main sustained the neglect of the issue of gender/sexual difference as a serious philosophical issue. There is also some agreement that this rethinking involves attention to the role of representation, in one form or another, in the constitution of sexed (and gendered) embodiment.

It is my contention that setting these concerns in the context of Derrida's philosophical concerns with sexual difference and the insights to be gleaned from deconstruction can help us in these endeavours, despite much feminist hostility to these moves. It both

raises the question of sexual difference as a philosophical issue and it can help in the reformulation of corporeality incorporating feminist insights. It can help us to rethink the materiality of corporeality in such a way as to recognise the salience of sexual difference to embodiment, and the salience of (sexed) embodiment to subjectivity, without, importantly, rendering sexual difference immutable or tying women to some sort of essential nature - however conceived. In this way it marks a significant intervention into contemporary gender/body theory in general, and within deconstructive approaches and corporeal feminisms in particular.

Alongside this, however, there has developed a major fault-line within feminist theory. For, although there has been an increase in the number of feminists applying deconstructive insights in their own projects during the 1990s, alongside this there has been a growing hostility to such work from feminists who see their own work as materialist but who seek to debunk the materialist pretensions of those whose work owes much to deconstructive insights. Any such moves are rejected on the grounds that the emphasis on representation involved renders them 'merely cultural' and entails the neglect of material factors such as the (biological) body or, in Marxist terms the economic system and class power. Again it is my contention that setting these concerns in the context of Derrida's philosophical attention to sexual difference and the insights to be gleaned from deconstruction can help us move beyond this impasse. This is a significant move for debates within feminism.

The thesis is divided into two parts. In the first part my aim is to examine the possibilities and limitations of a deconstructive approach



and to argue that the insights of Derrida's work are of much positive significance for feminists concerned with gender and sexual difference. The issues raised in Part 1 serve as a prolegomenon for the application of these deconstructive insights in the rethinking of corporeality, subjectivity and sexual difference that is the main focus of Part 2. The concern here is to develop a theory of gendered embodiment that acknowledges the social constitution of gendered embodiment whilst simultaneously avoiding either voluntarism or cultural determinism yet allowing for the possibility of change and transformation.

In chapter one I begin by setting out the main features of deconstruction and in particular *différance* and putting straight some popular misconceptions. Rather than attempting to cover every aspect of Derrida's work, I concentrate on the implications of *différance* i.e. the critique of the metaphysics of presence that Derrida discerns at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition and undecidability. One of the ways in which Derrida develops his critique of presence is through a deconstruction of the speech/writing opposition. The privileging of speech that is involved in this distinction is revealed to be based on the myth of presence. Derrida suggests an alternative understanding of writing and signification or language. This is examined in chapter 1 along with two highly significant implications: the challenge it presents to the reference /representation distinction and the impossibility of unmediated experience. All this is important for developing the critique of identity and establishing the undecidability of the category woman, which is the basis of my arguments in chapters 2, 3 and 5

Particular attention is also paid to the notorious suggestion in *Of Grammatology* that there is nothing outside of the text. In particular the conclusion drawn from this that Derrida's position is playful, rather than serious, and that deconstruction involves a refusal of materiality and therefore has no way of dealing with reality. This is a view that has haunted Derrida's work more or less since its inception and Derrida himself has attempted to counter it on many occasions. An examination of this view is of particular importance here because one of the main arguments of this thesis is that not only is this not the case, but breaking down the reference/representation distinction (which is also sometimes conceived of in terms of a reality/representation dichotomy) and relatedly the materiality/ideality distinction, is a necessary move for feminist gender theory in a number of important ways. (The detail of these will be demonstrated later.) It is argued that aspects of Derrida's work concerning the relationship between language, 'writing' and 'reality' can help us to do this.

The issue of the ethical and political implications of the undecidability involved in a deconstructive approach is also considered and addressed in a number of ways. One of these is through a comparison of deconstruction and pragmatism. I argue that the most significant difference between these two approaches lies in Derrida's concern with alterity - with otherness as that which exceeds logocentric closure (and as such challenges the myth of presence and the dream of plenitude). It is this that provides deconstruction with the critical edge that Rorty's pragmatism lacks. These issues are also addressed through an examination of the status of deconstruction as an intervention and its relation to empirical reality. These both involve further attention to the ethical commitment involved in deconstruction. Again these are



key themes in my argument and they reappear in various guises in the chapters that follow.

In chapter 2 I turn more specifically to the relationship between deconstruction and feminism. In order to demonstrate the positive possibilities presented for feminist concerns with gender and sexual difference I focus on the main obstacles to an appreciation of these insights. These are identified as Derrida's own use of the feminine and whether this is inimical to feminist concerns, the political implications of the anti-essentialism and undecidability involved in deconstructive insights, the threat to women's sense of themselves as women that the undecidability of the category women presents and accusations of nominalism and formalism. This involves returning to some of the main themes and arguments of chapter 1, in particular the deconstruction of the materiality/ideality distinction which emerges here in the guise of the reality/representation distinction, the political implications of undecidability, which are considered in the context of feminist concerns with gender and sexual difference and the critique of the category woman.

I begin with an examination of Derrida's use of the feminine and concern with the issue of sexual difference in *Spurs*. The main issues here revolve around whether or not these are considered inimical to feminist concerns. Although *Spurs* is not the only place in which Derrida employs metaphors of femininity and the category woman, it does involve an explicit concern with sexual difference as ontological difference and it has also been the focus of much feminist criticism. For these reasons I use it as an example on which to base my argument.

As I have established in chapter 1, Derrida's work opens up the space for concern with the 'other' as that which exceeds logocentric closure. In *Spurs* he characterises that other in terms of the 'becoming woman' and it is this that I examine in chapter 2. I do this through an examination of Kelly Oliver's (1994) argument that opening up the space for *différance* in Derrida, as in Nietzsche, depends on the exclusion of the feminine (especially the feminine mother) and in so doing, precludes the possibility of a specifically feminine voice or other. This also involves an examination of the argument that Derrida's concern with sexual difference does not relate to 'real-life' women in the world. Against this view I argue that the rendering of sexual difference as undecidable in *Spurs* helps us to see the role that the denigration or negation of the feminine (and/or woman) has played in fixing logocentric closure (e.g. in logocentric notions of subjectivity, sexual difference etc.). Further to this, precisely because it does not tie the feminine to the bodies of women it calls attention to the practices and knowledges, violence and exclusions, that do precisely that. I argue that appreciating the relevance of all this for 'real-life' women in the world involves applying the deconstructive insight that there can be no unmediated experience to the problematic of sexual difference and the body. I draw on the work of Gayatri Spivak to illustrate that rather than precluding attention to experience deconstructive strategies actually call attention to the mediating factors in the production of women's experiences - including such apparently intimate experiences as experiences of their own bodies and identities.

Further to this, I also examine whether the undecidability of the category woman requires abandoning the category altogether in a move 'beyond gender'. I draw on the work of Diane Elam to argue against



this move. Deconstructing the category women and rendering it undecidable allows us to focus productively on the factors involved in the production of woman as a determinate category and to highlight the violence and exclusions involved in this. This does not necessarily entail relinquishing the category but rather involves keeping it open as a site of contested meaning. This also relates to the question of the political implications of undecidability. Again I draw on the work of Elam to examine the positive possibilities that these insights present when applied to questions of gender and sexual difference.

Finally, in chapter 2, I consider arguments that deconstructive insights involve both nominalism and formalism and as such are unable to account for gender. Again, this involves returning to the arguments in chapter 1 and applying them to the problematic of gender and sexual difference, specifically those concerning the need to rethink the reference/representation distinction in order to accommodate the materiality of language.

To sum up then, in Part 1 I argue that deconstructive insights are of enormous significance for some of the fundamental issues in contemporary feminist gender and body theory, in particular: (the production of determinacy in relation to) the category woman; sexual difference and its ontological status; the significance of theoretical insights for everyday practices and identity formation; and identity politics. A further issue remains implicit in chapter 1, but is made explicit in Part 2. This concerns the issue of biology and the causal role that is traditionally accorded to it in the determination of sexual difference. These issues are introduced in the course of my arguments in Part 1 in the context of the relationship between feminism and

deconstruction more generally, but I will also return to, and develop, them in Part 2, in relation to the Body.

In Part 2 of the thesis I turn to the problematic of subjectivity, sexual difference and the body. As I said at the beginning, this is because the question of the relationship between these three aspects of human being is perhaps currently the most fundamental issue for feminist theory, and it is my contention that the insights I have been discussing in Part 1 can help in this regard. One of the ways they can do this concerns the issue of biology. They can help us address the question of biology and its role in the production of gender and sexual difference. The issue here concerns the extent to which it is biology which fixes these categories. Feminists have long questioned the equation of feminine characteristics with biological foundations and the 'natural'. Deconstructive insights applied to this issue further develop this questioning. They help us to see how it is that biology and the body are also historical and cultural products. Moreover I argue that they do this through rethinking the production of the matter and materiality of bodies rather than by rendering that matter immaterial, as the counter-argument goes.

In chapter three then I raise these issues in the context of attempts by feminist theorists to rethink the body in such a way as to recognise the salience of sexual difference and the embodied roots of subjectivity, without tying women to any sort of essential nature, whether biologically or psychologically based. I take as my focus the work of Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler. These three theorists all share the view that rethinking the body in this way involves rethinking corporeality beyond Cartesian dualism of mind/body,



subject/object. They all also attempt to move beyond the sex/gender, essentialism/construction, biology/culture dichotomies that have shaped much feminist thinking on these matters in the last three decades. There is some agreement that this all involves reformulating the relation between the natural, representation and the objects of representation. The main disagreement concerns the extent to which this rethinking involves a reconstructive project around the bodies of women, as in Irigaray's view. This is Grosz and Braidotti's move. I examine their arguments in some detail and argue that if we apply the insights of deconstruction regarding the materiality of signification (and the implications of this for the reference/meaning distinction) to the problematic of sex, gender and the body we can see two things. Not only does the attempt to build a reconstructive project around the bodies of women (and maybe men) serve to perpetuate the very binary thinking it seeks to challenge, in which case it is bound to fail, but these very insights provide a way of rethinking the materiality of the body that can acknowledge the salience of sexual difference without reifying it and thus avoid this pitfall.

Ultimately then Grosz and Braidotti fail because although they do in fact assimilate some deconstructive insights, they do not take these far enough. Butler, however, develops the notion of the materiality of the body as a discursive product. It is performatively produced in a process of subjectification that incorporates gender and sexual difference without according them primacy. This enables her to turn the question of sexual difference and the materiality of the body around. In her account the focus falls rather on the political effects of grounding the category woman in the materiality of bodies and posing that materiality (i.e. the materiality of sex) as causal, rather than the other way around..

In chapter 5 I go on to examine Butler's notion of performativity and its implications for feminist praxis in more detail. However Butler's notion of performativity draws on aspects of Foucault's work as well as Derrida's. Indeed at first sight it may seem to be more influenced by the former than the latter. On top of this, Foucault's genealogy involves an explicit focus on the body that is absent in Derrida's work. So before moving on to Butler's own work in chapter 5, I examine Foucault's genealogy in chapter 4 to see what his work has to offer that Derrida's does not and *vice versa*.

By now Derrida's early spat with Foucault over the interpretation of Cartesian doubt and the possibility of radical otherness is fairly well documented. Therefore, although it seems expedient to mention it here, the main focus of this chapter is rather a comparison of the relative merits of Foucault's notion of discourse and Derrida's notion of 'writing'. I return to Derrida's pronouncements concerning the nature of writing and language in *Of Grammatology* and develop them in the context of his critique of J. L. Austin's (1962) speech act theory in *How To Do Things With Words*. My purpose here is to demonstrate the significance of Derrida's view of the performative power of language and, in particular, the role of iterability within this. I argue that although Derrida himself does not apply these insights to the question of sexual difference and its relation to the body, such an application helps us to establish two things. These are that language plays a performative role in the production of sexed and gendered bodies. And that because this understanding of the performative includes the notion of iterability (and thus the possibility of failure) it allows the space for resistance and change that is somewhat



problematic in Foucault's account of the body as a disciplined product of power relations. Butler brings these insights together in her notion of performativity.

In chapter 5 I provide a detailed examination of Butler's notion of performance and performativity. Almost all of the themes of chapter 1 resurface here in one guise or another. For example, there is the question of the status of materiality in general and in the context of women's experience and biology in particular. There is also the charge of political inadequacy and the question of play. Added to this, other issues that follow from these themes but which are not captured within them are raised. For example there is the question of the constituted subject and the problem of agency, the issue of power and the debate with materialist feminisms.

I start by providing an overview of the development of Butler's work and drawing out the implications and motivations of the various moves she makes. The main theme concerns the rethinking of the reference/representation dichotomy that accompanies the deconstructive emphasis on the materiality of language and signification. I argue that this is the most fruitful move in rethinking the materiality of the body to develop a theory of embodied subjectivity within the problematic of subjectivity and sexual difference. This is in stark opposition to the arguments of certain materialist feminists who resist such deconstructive moves, describing them as ludic. I examine such arguments in some detail, focusing in particular on the work of Teresa Ebert. This has a twofold effect. It allows me to revisit some of the main criticisms levied at the deconstructive strategies examined and advocated in this thesis and once again reveal their basis in

misunderstanding and faulty premises; and it enables me to highlight the limitations of Ebert's own apparently more truly materialist approach. I argue that this is based on the search for an objective reality outside signification that is rendered futile by the insights of deconstruction. It is the argument of this thesis that this view of materiality as something outside language and signification is just not sustainable. Butler, no more than Derrida, dematerialises social realities as the counter-argument goes. It is rather that they both provide a means of examining the production of those realities in their materiality and, importantly for my concerns here, they both attempt to find a means of challenging them. Indeed this is the fundamental argument of this thesis.

# PART 1

## FEMINISM & DECONSTRUCTION

# Chapter I

## Derrida, Deconstruction and *Différance*

"The relation to self...can only be *différance* , that is to say, alterity, or trace" (Derrida 1992:261)

What exactly is deconstruction? This is a very difficult question to which there is no easy answer. In fact my intention in this thesis is not so much to delineate what deconstruction is, as to examine how certain deconstructive insights can contribute to the understanding of gendered embodiment. In particular the seemingly intractable questions that currently haunt feminist gender theory concerning the 'nature' of sexual difference and the relationship between this and the body, identity and subjectivity. The main concern amongst those working in this area is to find a way of acknowledging the corporeal roots of gendered subjectivity without succumbing to some form of essentialism (however conceived) or psychological or biological reductionism (as I discuss in chapter 3). The basic argument is that this involves rethinking the relationship between the cultural and the natural, representation and the objects of representation. My argument, to reiterate, is that a deconstructive approach and, in particular, aspects of Derrida's work concerning the relationship between meaning or 'writing' and reality, can help us to do this. They can be employed within feminist frameworks despite Derrida's lack of feminist credentials himself and the apparent misogyny in his theorising around sexual difference (that I examine in chapter 2). If I sometimes use the term deconstruction interchangeably with the name



'Derrida' this is not because I confuse the man and the work but because I use the them both to describe his work and to indicate the strategies and insights that attach to his name, whether he likes it or not. I say whether he likes it or not because he sometimes insists that deconstruction is not a strategy or a method but it is a process and an intervention. All this can seem very confusing but it is not my concern to untangle it by engaging with debates around these issues but rather, to reiterate, to examine, selectively, what I have called the insights of deconstruction. However I do want to point out that it would seem to me to involve a method as well as a process, if method is taken to imply simply what one does. The method aspect involves an explicit attempt to focus on what is involved in the production of coherent meaning, especially the marginalisation and exclusions it entails. The process aspect refers to the ways in which the elements that Derrida describes in deconstruction are always already in process. They are part and parcel of the production, reception, and interpretation of meaning and, importantly, its instability and undecidability (as I will demonstrate here). Moreover, all this would seem to imply a strategy of reinscription and intervention.

In this chapter I will begin by setting out the main features and implications of deconstruction and *différance* that I find to be of particular relevance and, my disclaimers above notwithstanding, setting straight some popular misconceptions. The main focus will be Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence, the critique of the speech/writing opposition and the undecidability that these involve. However as way into the specifics of these aspects of deconstruction I will begin with a more general introduction to Derrida's work and its precursors and contexts.

## Precursors and Contexts

Deconstruction, or grammatology as Derrida first introduced it, has far reaching implications for understanding the role and status of heterosexually defined sexual difference in Western thought and practice. Even while Derrida ignores almost completely the implications for the positioning of female subjectivities and individual experiences of gendered subjectivities, the insights gleaned through his work nevertheless serve to challenge the whole system of thought on which the contemporary epistemico-ontological regime and concomitant understandings of the subject and subjectivity are based. However since all of Derrida's work is notoriously difficult to summarise, it might be helpful to sketch in some of the main strands that have contributed to its development, or at least the development of the elements I have identified as my main focus here. Much of what is to follow in the section below is drawn from *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1967).<sup>1</sup> For although Derrida's work has many strands and is plurivocal, multi-layered and contrapuntal, and amounts to a veritable labyrinth, as one interlocutor suggests, (in *Positions*, Derrida 1981a). This early work provides a classic account of his critique of presence, and much of what is involved in is e.g. his view of language and 'writing', and *différance*. Moreover Spivak's translator's preface affords valuable insight into not only this early work, but Derrida's whole corpus.

---

<sup>1</sup> It is here in Part I that he deconstructs the speech/writing opposition and in Part II turns to Rousseau to develop the notion of the supplement and the dependence of identity on difference and to Levi-Strauss to demonstrate the dangers of objectifying the 'other' in the form in this case of the peoples he was researching among. Derrida deconstructs the presence/sign binary opposition in *Speech and Phenomena*.



Derrida's three main precursors are acknowledged in *Of Grammatology* as Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger. These three set the context in various ways for Derrida's own work, or one might say, deconstruction. All three in their different ways were concerned with difference and all three, again in their different ways, questioned the closure of metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> Indeed they all moved towards articulating the need for a strategy of *sous rature*, (under erasure), as Spivak points out. Freud and Nietzsche implicitly (and respectively) put the psyche and knowing under erasure, Heidegger explicitly put Being under erasure.

Derrida developed this strategy from Heidegger's practice of writing Being *sous rature*, i.e. Being. This involved crossing out the word but then letting the word remain legible covered by the deletion. The reason being that although the word is inadequate it nevertheless remains necessary. Heidegger put Being under erasure as he came to think that the word Being was inadequate, since the concept of Being is always necessarily precomprehended, always anterior to thought itself. For as Spivak succinctly puts it, drawing on *Zur Seinsfrage*, (where Heidegger engaged with the problem of definitions) "in order for the nature of anything in particular to be defined as an entity the question of Being in general must always already be broached and answered in the affirmative. That something is, presupposes that anything can be" (Spivak in Derrida, 1974: xiv). It cannot then answer the question 'What is...?' Nevertheless since our language does not permit of anything else it is still necessary to use the word Being, which is why Heidegger puts it *sous rature*. Derrida also faced with the difficulties

---

<sup>2</sup> However Nietzsche is said to be the only one of the three whose texts, with their disruptive play manage to avoid (at least in part) the thrall of metaphysics

and contradictions involved in using the language of metaphysics to question metaphysics and to render the familiar unfamiliar, adopts this same strategy (without the mark). Indeed his writing as Spivak reminds us, always implies an invisible erasure (Derrida, 1974: xviii).

However Derrida's links with Heidegger do not stop there. Heidegger's call for an end to, indeed destruction of, metaphysics sets the context at least in part for Derrida's own deconstruction of metaphysics. Nevertheless Derrida discerns in Heidegger the attempt to make of Being (albeit under erasure) the ultimate reference, in his terms the transcendental signified. For in privileging 'Being' as opposed to 'being' in the ontic-ontological distinction, Heidegger places it outside of signification and therefore although it is not ascribed some kind of fixed origin, or end point of language, it nevertheless retains a recognizably theological situation. In contrast to this Derrida's own major concern is to avoid any such founding moment or master concept which he might refer to as a transcendental signified, using the language of Lacan with whose work he also engages. Hence Derrida's emphasis is not on Being but on *différance*, the trace, supplementarity and, at least in *Of Grammatology*, arche-writing. However I will discuss these 'terms' further, later in this chapter, along with accusations that despite his intentions to the contrary, Derrida similarly succumbs to a kind of ontotheology. For now I want to continue to set the context for deconstruction and *différance* by turning to Nietzsche.

"No-one would think of saying that Derrida is Nietzschean" announced Michael Hoar boldly in his paper 'The Play of Nietzsche in Derrida' (Hoar 1992: 52). (No-one that is except Rorty who is obviously not present on Hoar's list of reading materials.) Hoar argues that



Derrida's concern with temporality and temporalization as involved in the structure of *différance* and his concern with the metaphysics of presence, among other things, are far removed from Nietzsche's philosophy of life and the cosmos. However he concedes that he does take from Nietzsche a certain orientation. Something that Derrida himself refers to as a sense of "philosophizing with a hammer" (Derrida, 1982: xii) and which is indicated by a kind of all-pervasive reflexivity. However, while it may be true that Derrida's concerns are not well reflected in Nietzsche's philosophy of life and the cosmos, in many ways both the style and the strategy of his writing is anticipated by Nietzsche. For example, Nietzsche also grappled with the relationship between language and reality and meditated on the problem of the inescapability of language. He took the view that we are caught within language and that this is all the more evident in the fact that even to give expression to that fact we must use the very language that entraps us. It is not possible therefore to have an original thought because if we could express such a thing we would not then be trapped. Reality then is not directly perceived it is rather constituted by language. All this means that literal, true, self-identical meaning is simply not possible. Words are signs and each sign can only have meaning in a contextual relationship with other signs; no meaning is literal, all meaning is metaphorical. Nietzsche responded to this problem by adopting a (philosophical) strategy of play and laughter and, embracing paradox, incorporated reflexivity into his own writing.

### *Nietzsche and Metaphor*

In terms of understanding Derrida's view of language it is helpful to consider Nietzsche's view of metaphor. As already mentioned, in

Nietzsche's view, all language is intrinsically metaphorical but the philosophical significance of this lies in the fact that ever since Plato this point has been systematically suppressed. (In this sense then the Sophists were closer to wisdom, for they implicitly acknowledged that thought is ineradicably tied to the rhetorical devices that pervade it, as Hoar (1992) points out.) However Derrida, like Nietzsche, makes the point that language is intrinsically and inescapably metaphorical. All language works by tropes and figures, including that of philosophy and not just literature where such devices are more obvious. All language is arbitrary and fictive. The difference is that while literary works acknowledge their own rhetorical status other forms of writing do not, although they are equally figurative. Metaphor is ubiquitous and ineradicable therefore *no* language is ever literally literal. What Derrida does then is to stress the irreducibility of metaphor and the play of differences even within the construction of purportedly literal meaning. In his deconstructive practice<sup>3</sup> this involves focusing on the points in a (philosophical) text, or indeed the construction of meaning, where these structural features are dissimulated. He does this through close readings of texts which highlight the ambiguities in the metaphysical binary oppositions at work within them. He finds that in each of these oppositions the first term is privileged and depends for its identity on the exclusion of the other. He suggests that there is thus 'a logic of the supplement' at work in these terms (which I will discuss further later). They are not autonomous and self identical although again these 'facts' dissimulated.

---

<sup>3</sup>Derrida may dispute that deconstruction is a practice, though he would insist, as I said earlier, that it is a process but since it is what in fact he practices I reserve the right to use this description



One strategy he employs in this practice involves the reversal of metaphysical oppositions such as concept/metaphor, literal/metaphorical. This is a strategy he takes from Nietzsche. However, Derrida goes beyond reversing them and revealing their complicity with each other since this would do nothing to challenge the oppositional structure itself but would rather result in a sort of reversed Platonism. He thus adds a strategy of displacement to the one of reversal. Indeed this two pronged aspect is characteristic of the double strategy of deconstruction. Derrida's aim (if I may be so bold as to impute his intentions) is to introduce undecidability into the logic of reversal in order to reveal the ambiguities involved in sustaining such terms as oppositional. As he puts it in 'Tympan', which serves as an introduction to *Margins of Philosophy*, he wants "to inscribe a *loxos*" and "to set the *loxos* in the logos to work" (Derrida, 1982: xv). His point is that these are not superficial ambiguities. They are rather constitutive of logocentrism.

Logocentrism is the term Derrida introduces in *Of Grammatology* to characterise the Western philosophical tradition (and thus the contemporary epistemico-ontological regime) which is based on the suppression of these ambiguities. He uses it to suggest the ways in which the Western philosophical tradition succumbs to a 'metaphysics of presence' which is organised (economically) around an illusory centre (the logos).<sup>4</sup> Deconstructive readings therefore destabilise the whole system. Hence he is accused of nihilism and irrationalism by

---

<sup>4</sup>In *Margins of Philosophy, Dissemination* and *Spurs* logocentrism becomes phallogocentrism to indicate the presence of the phallus in the logos. In other words to mark the sexual structure of the metaphysics of presence. As Peggy Kamuff puts it, "to indicate a certain sexual scene behind or before -but always within- the scene of philosophy" (Kamuf 1991: 314). This is despite the pretensions of philosophy to objectivity.

those whose interests are antithetical to such revelations<sup>5</sup>. However this is also something that I will discuss in more detail later. For now I want to turn to Derrida's notion of language as 'writing' and *différance*, and introduce the notion of 'presence' which is a key element in his critique of logocentrism.

### **Language as writing and *différance***

In Derrida's critique of logocentrism his overriding concern, following Heidegger, is with the myth of original presence. It is this which sustains and characterises the western philosophical tradition, which is why he also refers to it at various times as 'Western metaphysics', or the 'metaphysics of presence'. For Derrida the language of metaphysics, entails a dream of plenitude and a myth of presence, which privileges identity and certainty through the suppression of difference and ambiguity. This dream or myth is ubiquitous. It is foundational to Western thought and pervades every aspect of Western culture. It is an unacknowledged presumption in all knowledge-claims and it underpins the notion of the Cartesian sovereign subject. Nevertheless if language is understood as in Derrida's extended version of writing and placed in the context of *différance* this myth just is not sustainable.'.

But what then is presence? Simplifying in the extreme in order to be clear about the complex and radical ideas involved in deconstruction and their profound implications for philosophy and therefore, in Derrida's view and mine, for understanding the nature of western

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example Barry Smart's letter to the London Times, 9 May 1992 (cited in Royle 1995:1) in which just such accusations are made.



thought, presence can be thought of as pure unmediated knowledge. This is an ideal which he maintains has pervaded the main traditions of western philosophy at least since Plato.<sup>6</sup> Indeed Derrida's seminal deconstructive writings span a wide range of disparate thinkers. They began however with an early engagement with Husserl's phenomenology, and as Dews points out, all involve a basic insight concerning the paradoxical status of writing that he gleaned while working on the introduction to his first book which was a translation of Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* (Dews 1987). This is the paradox that writing simultaneously institutes truth and meaning yet also undermines them. This insight stemmed from Husserl's recognition of the role of language in the institution of objectivity and truth; that they are mediated by language.

Further to this, Dews (1987) points out that Derrida's early concern was with locating the point at which the idea of transcendental consciousness starts to break down. He perceived this to be the point when language or, more specifically, writing is recognised as an intrinsic aspect of transcendental consciousness rather than an extraneous factor. Thus the initial focus of deconstruction in *Of Grammatology* was on the speech/writing opposition that Derrida discerns at the heart of the 'metaphysics of presence'. He argues that it is through posing speech and writing in oppositional terms that speech (or the voice and 'auto-affection') came to be privileged over writing and considered to be the precondition of writing. Whereas he

---

<sup>6</sup> Derrida identifies these traditions as Platonism (see the deconstruction of the *Phaedrus* in *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1974) ; Romanticism (see the deconstruction of Rousseau's texts also in *Of Grammatology*(Derrida 1974) (Herein after OG)); Structuralism (see his deconstruction of Saussure in 'The Supplement of Copula' in *The Margins of Philosophy*, (Derrida 1982) (herein after MOP); Ordinary language analytic philosophy (see *Signature, Event, Context* (herein after SEC) also in MOP and his debate with John Searle in *Glyph* reprinted in *Limited Inc* (Derrida 1988a)

demonstrates that it is rather the other way around and writing is the precondition of speech but that in privileging speech over writing in this way the externality of speech itself is suppressed. Through this suppression the fact that it is writing, not speech that is the precondition of language is dissimulated.

The point he wants to make in all this, however, is that this privileging and suppression, which he refers to as 'phonocentrism', is not so much a matter of error, as intrinsic to the dream of plenitude, and the association of truth with self-presence, that pervades and sustains the Western philosophical tradition i.e. logocentrism.

However Derrida's deconstruction of the speech/writing opposition also involves a reformulation of the notion of writing and this needs to be grasped for the full force of his argument to be appreciated. He argues that not only does writing, in the conventional sense, depend on a system of marks so, too, does speech. This system of marks also needs to be recognised as a form of writing and then it can be recognised that speech is not, and cannot be, self-identical any more than writing is or can be.

Speech is dependent on a linguistic economy which he portrays as having a graphematic structure, in which all the sounds are signs (marks, graphemes) dependent for their meaning on both their relation to other signs and the context: i.e. language. Thus he extends the concept of writing through introducing terms such as 'grapheme'. He argues: "there are no phonemes before the grapheme. That is before that which operates as a principle of death within speech"



(Derrida 1974: 245).<sup>7</sup> In *Of Grammatology* the terms he uses for the system of marks that enable speech is 'archi-writing' or the 'trace structure'<sup>8</sup>. Hence despite the illusion of '*s'entendre-parler*', (that is the experience of hearing oneself speak) the meaning of the spoken word is no more immediate, no more fully present to the speaker, or for that matter to the hearer, than is that of the written word to the writer or the reader.

The concept of writing is therefore broadened from the empirical concept of an intelligible system of notations on a material substance, as in marks on a page. Derrida extends it to demonstrate the graphematic structure of spoken language; that is that words are signs or marks that are always inhabited by the trace (in a signifying chain). This graphematic structure is analogous to Freud's application of the metaphor of writing to the structure of the psyche.<sup>9</sup> It thus comes to signify the structure of the sign as that which is always inhabited by the trace. The trace, that is, of a radical alterity; that which is totally other.

---

<sup>7</sup>The theme of death is a frequent occurrence in Derrida's work on language and communication see in particular *The Gift*. However it is not one that I particularly develop in this thesis.

<sup>8</sup>Structure is a complex notion here; it is not to be distinguished from structure in the structuralist sense of base/superstructure or an edifice built around a stable centre. Structure, for Derrida, is dependent on, and produced by, a process of iteration which I will discuss later. (See Positions, and Gasché 1986, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> See 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' in Derrida (1978) *Writing and Difference*. Here Derrida focuses on three of Freud's texts, 'Project for a Scientific Psychology' (1885) *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) and 'A Note on a Mystic Writing Pad' (1925) He charts the emergence in the latter of Freud's description of the psyche, in terms of both content and apparatus, as a 'space of writing'. The separation of the psyche into content and apparatus is significant for Derrida for two reasons in particular. In establishing the workings of the psychic apparatus as inaccessible to the psyche, perception becomes an originary inscription. That is, since it is the psychic apparatus that receives outside stimuli and thus protects the psyche, perception is always therefore already an inscription. This then implies that permanent traces develop which are not available to consciousness but which later affect it. It also undermines the continuity of time-perception. Time becomes a mark of what Derrida terms the economy of writing on, what Freud terms, the mystic writing pad of the psyche. In other words the psyche is inhabited by a radical alterity; and perception and temporality become functions of writing. Secondly and relatedly, this also serves to decentre the sovereign subject.

There is always a beyond, a structural supplementarity to language (signification). This too is part of writing in the extended sense that Derrida develops. Hence he says 'Writing will appear to us more and more as another name for this structure of supplementarity" (Derrida 1974: 245).

### *Différance*

And it is this constitution of the present, as an 'originary' and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, *stricto sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions (to reproduce analogically and provisionally a phenomenological and transcendental language that will soon reveal itself to be inadequate), that I propose to call *archi-writing*, *archi-trace*, or *différance* . Which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization" (Derrida, *Différance* 1982: 13).

*Différance*, then, is an attempt to think the unthinkable, to deny presence and to challenge and displace the binary thinking of Western logic. It is a neologism which combines two elements: Saussure's insight concerning the differential structure of language, wherein the meaning of each word or sign is produced only in relation to all the other words or signs; and Husserlian *ruckfrage* in which there is both a potential endlessness and an attempt to recover an original sense (Dews 1987: 11). Where it differs from Saussure is in the separation of the signifier, which is the sound or mark, and the signified, which is the meaning. In Saussure's structural linguistics far from being separated these two aspects are like the two sides of a sheet of paper. Although for Saussure meaning is produced within, rather than reflected by, language, and there is an arbitrary conjunction of signifiers



and signifieds, meaning is, nevertheless, still *fixed*. Whereas for Derrida it is not that the signified is fixed, but rather that any apparent fixing is a temporary retrospective effect of representation. This works through a process of iterability, as his various deconstructions show.<sup>10</sup> Meaning is thus never fully present in a sign. Each sign is always inhabited by traces which are never present and absent others. Derrida thus suggests the impossibility of closing off the process of the differing and deferral of meaning within language.

*Différance*, however, as Derrida insists in '*Différance*' (reprinted in *Margins of Philosophy*) needs to be understood in the context of its place in a chain of other terms, or 'nonsynonymous substitutions', which also refer to writing and which inscribe *différance* 'according to the necessity of the context' (Derrida 1982: 12), e.g. archi-writing, the archi-trace, spacing, the supplement, pharmakon, hymen, the margin-mark-scratch, among others. Although all these terms are similar they are not exactly the same. They are all themselves supplements or hinges or brisures which disrupt the binary oppositions that are at the root of conceptuality. They are not third terms as in some sort of Hegelian *Aufhebung* in which contradictions are transcended, but rather represent an alternative to it. They have a nonself-identical kind of sense that involves movement and avoids and disrupts the dialectic of opposition and synthesis, and prevents them rejoining the logocentric order of western metaphysics. Thus, *différance*, Derrida warns, in *Positions*, "cannot be elevated into a master-word, or master concept, since it blocks every relationship to theology, [it] finds itself

---

<sup>10</sup> I discuss this notion further later in this chapter and in chapters 4 and 5.

enmeshed in the work that pulls it through a chain of other 'concepts' other 'words' other textual configurations" (Derrida, 1981: 40).<sup>11</sup>

The movement of *différance* , then, undermines the interpretive attempt at closure, any attempt to grasp the coherent and unitary meaning of the text or its definitive truth. For Derrida it is this movement, this play of presence and absence that blocks the possibility of closure. No term or text, (and that is text in Derrida's extended sense of writing), carries within it self-evident, or self-identical, meaning. Meaning also involves the play of further terms whose own meaning is also instituted in a similar way. Importantly then the implications are that there simply is no founding moment. No transcendental signified. No originary origin. Indeed the concept of origin is linked to presence. Hence *différance* , or for that matter the trace, or archi-writing are not to be considered as involving origins, but rather as involving temporization, or spacing. In other words "The sign represents the present [or the 'thing'] in its absence" (MOP: 9) "When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign" (MOP: 9). And of course for Derrida it is precisely the point that we never can grasp or show the thing -- whatever 'it' may be, in itself. Hence all of meaning is part of this process of temporization and spacing. To indicate just how expansive, or indeed inclusive, this is he goes on:

Whether we are concerned with the verbal or written sign, with the monetary sign, or the electoral delegation and political representation, the circulation of signs defers the moment in

---

<sup>11</sup>Of course there is a sense in which such 'non-concepts' cannot help but become concepts, despite these protestations of Derrida's. The point is they are employed to instantiate that which Derrida seeks to demonstrate as outside of logocentric logic.



which we encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or spend it, touch it see it, intuit its presence (MOP: 9).

Signification is thus the *différance* of temporization. All this, he argues, moves away from classical semiology in that it rejects the idea within that of the sign as a substitute of an absent presence (albeit secondary and provisional). This is because of the way that *différance* itself becomes originary. This is not in the traditional sense of origin as implying presence as in *ousia* or *parousia*, which, he points out in a footnote (p.9), both "imply presence as both origin and end, the founding principle (*arkhé-*) as that toward which one moves (*telos, askhaton*)" (p.9). *Différance*, temporization, and spacing do not imply something that is included in the concept of the sign itself, he argues. This is because this has traditionally been seen as representing a presence in a system of thought which conceived of itself as moving towards (full) presence. (*Différance*, to reiterate, does not suggest a representation of a possible but absent presence. It is rather the conditions of possibility of signification itself.) This therefore entails questioning the authority of presence and also, *mutatis mutandis*, the other half of the binary opposition, absence or lack. In this sense then the question of *différance*, Derrida argues, returns to a kind of Heideggerian question and to ontico-ontological difference. And he likens the notion of temporization in *différance* to Heidegger's comments in *Being and Time* about "temporalization as the transcendental horizon of the question of Being which must be liberated from its traditional metaphysical domination by the present and the now" and says that there is between them "a strict communication, even though not an exhaustive and irreducibly necessary one" (MOP: 10). *Différance* he insists does not stand before the differences it produces in a simple, straightforward way. It is rather

that *différance* is "the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences" and, importantly, he stresses that "the name "origin" no longer suits it" (MOP: 11). Thus: "To come to recognise, not within but on the horizon of the Heideggerian paths, and yet in them, that the sense of being is not a transcendental or trans-epochal signified (even if it is always dissimulated within the epoch) but already, in a truly unheard of sense, a determined signifying trace, is to affirm that within the decisive concept of ontico-ontological difference, all is not to be thought at one go; entity and being, ontic and ontological, 'ontico-ontological,' are, in an original style, derivative with regard to difference; and with respect to what I shall later call *différance*, an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring" (Derrida 1974:23). For Heidegger the ontico-ontological difference and its ground are not originary in an absolute sense; for Derrida "*Différance* by itself would be more 'originary' but one would no longer be able to call it 'origin' or 'ground', those notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology, to the system functioning as the effacing of difference" (Derrida 1974: 23).

## Play

However, although I will discuss further the status of *différance* etc. as origin, for now I want to mention the significance of describing this process in terms of play. The use of the word play in describing the movement of *différance* has had rather unfortunate repercussions. It has been widely taken up and used as a means with which to criticise Derrida's view of language and meaning as both non-serious in philosophical terms and as something essentially free-floating and unrestricted in descriptive terms. However Derrida does not himself



anywhere speak of the free-play of the signifier, as Marion Hobson (1987: 114) has pointed out. Indeed to construe the play of signifiers as 'free-play' is a misnomer with important ramifications for the political implications of deconstructive notions of reinscription and destabilisation and Derrida's concern with the hierarchies of forces. Nevertheless it was translated in this way by the first translator of *Structure, Sign and Play* in the USA in 1966 and became the dominant reading there. Indeed even the French word for play, '*jeu*' is rarely used apart from in *Of Grammatology* and then again in *Spurs/Eperons*. The mistake, Hobson suggests perhaps stems from a confusion with Kant's 'freies spiele' - the free play of the power of judgment. Whereas Derrida informs us in *Positions* that what he meant by 'play' was the kind of play that becomes evident in mechanical parts as of, say, a car engine. A certain looseness and movement nevertheless bound within the structure of the machinery.<sup>12</sup>

Another important point to note in relation to this point about play and movement is that just as this account is not to suggest that there is a freeplay of signifiers, neither is it to suggest that meaning is completely flexible. It is rather to demonstrate through close readings of the philosophical canon that meaning is not fixed but open to multiple interpretations. These are fixed retrospectively through the process of interpretation and are always context specific.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> However this misunderstanding is a good example of the very problems of translation that deconstruction highlights. Derrida also comments on it in a number of places, e.g. in the 'Afterword' in *Limited Inc* (Derrida 1988a: 115-6)

<sup>13</sup> See for example *Signature, Event, Context* and *Limited Inc* where Derrida discusses this point in the context of John Searle's rejection of his (Derrida's) deconstruction of Austin's 'How to do things with words' drawing out the implications and covert metaphysical assumptions.. Moreover a close reading of Derrida's own texts reveal the serious and indeed rigorous argumentation wrapped in a playful, rhetorical style. See for example Gayatri Spivak's discussion of these issues in *Diacritics*, Vol XIX, 1982

One more aspect of Derrida's view of language to consider in relation to these points about the play of signifiers and the flexibility of meaning before moving on to considering the implications of all this, for my (feminist) purposes here, is the significance of the distinction Derrida makes between polysemia and what he terms dissemination.<sup>14</sup> Polysemia suggests the multiplicity of meanings whereas what Derrida is concerned with in dissemination is the way that meaning is never fully captured; that there is always an irreducible excess. This excess is always spilling over, as meaning is always dispersed, divided and never identical with itself. The point, therefore, is not, as he is sometimes interpreted to mean, that there is no meaning, or that, to reiterate, meaning is completely flexible, but rather that if there is no stable economy of words and concepts, then meaning is far more insecure, elusive and prone to undecidability than it is traditionally philosophically presumed.

This account of meaning and its production then, if accepted, clearly has profound implications for the whole of the Western philosophical tradition. Most notably in that, through a phonocentric privileging of the voice, meaning is deemed present in the Word (logos) and this, in turn, presupposes the presence of a speaking subject as unitary origin. This is exposed now as an illusion, a result of the impossible dream of plenitude. It can be seen that Derrida's account of language as writing and *différance* has opened up unprecedented perspectives on meaning, interpretation and indeed the fundamental nature of western philosophy. It challenges the traditional philosophical understanding of language, rejecting the notion of a transcendental signified - i.e. that

---

<sup>14</sup> (See for example Dissemination). I discuss these points in more detail in chapter 4.



which gives meaning to all other signifieds, such as God, the Subject or the Author - at the endpoint of the process of deferral. He draws attention to the instability of language and meaning, which are always dispersed, never at one with themselves, and as his analysis of temporality, shows, this instability denies access to the present in the sense of 'nowness'.

## Reference

Moreover, since Derrida's notions of *différance*, the trace structure, iterability, etc. render impossible any straightforward match between language and the world (the referent), they problematize the notion of referential truth. The trouble is, however, that this has seemed to suggest that there is nothing outside language. As, for example in Derrida's notorious statement in *Of Grammatology* that "*Il n'y a pas d'hors texte*" (p.274) which, taken outside of his own extended sense of the term 'text', is often understood in this way. Nonetheless a significant aspect of Derrida's sophistication and the appeal of his work for me, is precisely that, in contrast to more outrageous postmodernist proclamations, he refuses to take that view. Indeed it is precisely his point in speaking of the disseminating, rather than polysemic, power of language, that there is always something spilling over, always that which resists conceptualization. As he remarks in response to a question from Richard Kearney, "To distance oneself from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it does not amount to saying that there is nothing beyond language (Derrida in Kearney 1984: 124). What it is doing though, is pushing our conceptualization of the structure of reference

to its limits.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless this is a complex point and the status of materiality is perhaps one of the chief stumbling blocks for feminists like myself concerned with subjectivity, corporeality and sexual difference, and it is one to which I will return in each of the following chapters. . However it seems to me that deconstruction, and in particular *différance*, in focusing on the productive power of language<sup>16</sup> do provide useful ways of understanding the production of sexed bodies - subjectivity, identity and sexual difference and the devaluing of female identity represented as other. However as this is the subject of my next chapter suffice it for now to say, with Robyn Ferrell, that it is perhaps better to translate the statement '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' as 'there is no outside to the text' in order to grasp at the Derridean notion that there is no radical alterity which is graspable. There is no pure outside that can stand apart from representation and found it. Deconstruction and *différance* do not address the sceptics question. 'Reality', as Ferrell puts it, "is not the subject of their concerns but rather philosophy's quest for a pure outside untouched by the philosophers subjectivity" (Ferrell 1993: 126).

### **Deconstruction and Pragmatism**

Another way into addressing these issues around *différance* , etc. is to consider Richard Rorty's pragmatist response to deconstruction, and to consider his view of *différance* , iterability etc "as merely abbreviations for the familiar Piercian-Wittgensteinian anti-Cartesian thesis that meaning is a function of context, and that there is no theoretical barrier to an endless sequence of recontextualizations" (Rorty 1991: 240). Not

---

<sup>15</sup> Indeed Drucilla Cornell (1991) renames deconstruction as 'philosophy of the limit'.

<sup>16</sup> Cornell (1991) also makes this point, see in particular p. 28 and p.104.



only does according Derrida the status of rigorous philosophical argumentation - albeit couched in performative style - amount to a contradiction in terms. "It amounts to paying good old logocentric compliments to someone who is an enemy of logocentrism" (Rorty 1991: 37). However it is precisely to avoid logocentric strategies that Derrida does couch much of his work in performative style. Indeed it is precisely because of this that his work has met with such controversy and a refusal of recognition in analytic circles. The latter refuse to countenance this style in which he often gets his philosophical points across by instantiating that which he wishes to demonstrate. Rorty also wants to ignore the (albeit much disputed) 'serious' philosophical aspect of Derrida's work and rejects any notion of him as a 'much misunderstood philosopher of reflection' in favour of an interpretation of him as 'a much misunderstood nominalist, a sort of French Wittgenstein'. At one point he even tries to appropriate Deconstruction to 'his kind of pragmatism'. This latter, he claims, is aimed at edification rather than questions of truth and falsity which he deems to have lost their relevance since philosophy can no longer be usefully seen as 'the mirror of nature' and is better conceived as one of many voices in the conversation of mankind (sic). The trouble with this view, however, is that it ignores altogether Derrida's ethical and political concerns. Rorty's mistake rests on his Wittgensteinian reduction of language to a mere tool. For despite certain similarities with Wittgenstein on the one hand (see Staten 1994) language as characterised in *différance*, iterability etc is something more than this. Here, there is always something extra, something other, something which resists and persists beyond any attempt to conceptualize it or to use it. This otherness or alterity is what interests Derrida. He is not making the idealist move that Rorty suggests. He is rather concerned



with the failure of idealism to appreciate the problem of alterity. The root of this difference that makes a difference, then, lies in this concern with alterity.

Indeed it seems to me that Rorty's argument in 'Deconstruction and Circumvention' is deeply flawed. His argument can be summed up in the following three points: all words are enmeshed in the kind of chain Derrida posits for *différance*; despite Derrida's insistence to the contrary *différance* has become a word; and that it is paradoxical of Derrida to take a language game account of the meaning of words and simultaneously privilege some as incapable of theological use. This, it seems to me, exemplifies a spectacular but nevertheless strategic misconception of *différance*, and what Derrida is trying to do through it: that is to think the unthought, the unthinkable, the unrepresentable; to allude to the 'ghosts' that necessarily haunt all language use and to gesture, in a double strategy characteristic of deconstruction, towards thinking outside of the language of metaphysics whilst simultaneously recognising the need to do so from within it. Hence *différance* is an attempt to inscribe both/and and in so doing avoid conceptualizing in the metaphysical terms of either/or.<sup>17</sup> Rorty, however, sees this as somekind of theological move and he himself is very concerned not to accord any kind of theological status to any aspect of language or language use, and to avoid any sort of ultimate reference point for the 'conversations of mankind'. Moreover his contention in the following passage exemplifies again both what seems to be an inadequate understanding of *différance* and

---

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, and indeed somewhat paradoxically, it is however an example of Grellings paradox in that in instantiating that which it itself alludes to it therefore paradoxically simultaneously becomes identical with itself and also instantiates the very possibility of that which it renders impossible ( see Hobson 1985).

that which is at stake in the difference between Derrida's deconstruction and Rorty's pragmatism:

Again, if Derrida wants a 'general strategy of deconstruction', he must formulate one which is something more than 'avoiding both simply neutralizing the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing in the closed field of operations, thereby confirming it. Such dual avoidance can be achieved simply by pointing out that the oppositions are there, and then not taking them very seriously. That is what most of our culture has been doing for a long time now. Our culture has not only been carried upward by a bubbling fountain of puns and metaphors; it has been increasingly conscious of itself as resting on nothing more solid than such a geyser. If all Derrida is saying is that we should take the dead metaphors of the philosophical tradition less seriously than Heidegger took them, it is only fair to reply that his own early writing takes them more seriously than the later Heidegger himself took them. (Rorty 1991: 103-4)

However as I have tried to make clear that is precisely *not* what Derrida is saying or what *différance* implies. In Rorty's view of language, previous accounts,<sup>18</sup> whether referential or representational, are not rejected as illusory but rather they are viewed as simply more usefully dispensed with. He is not, therefore able to accept any attempt to view Derrida as seeking the conditions of possibility of language use (Gasché 1986) or as portraying the essential nature of language (Culler 1982) or of giving an accurate representation of language. Or for that matter of showing any concern with what is not captured in language.

---

<sup>18</sup> See Rorty 1991 for details of this account.



Thus Derrida's concerns with alterity are far removed from the ambit of Rorty's pragmatism. Deconstruction is a critical project in which the critical aspect stems from the process of reflection and continuous self-reflection. Rorty's Pragmatism, by contrast, and in particular his liberal utopia,<sup>19</sup> involves a rejection of the viability of critical projects, adopting the view that if we cannot get outside our institutions and beliefs then self-reflection is not useful. Therefore we should abandon any attempt to do so or to theorise our practices. Hence, to articulate this point a little more clearly, while Rorty, like Derrida accepts the inescapability of logocentrism (at least in any straightforward sense) but the conclusions they both draw from this are very different. Rorty thinks we should simply accept this, accept our society and its major institutions, accept that radical critique is no longer, indeed never was, possible, and turn to the bourgeois liberalism (characterised as 'postmodern' at one point) of the North Atlantic democracies as the best of all possible worlds; forsaking the search for foundations along the way, in 'a culture of ironism' in which poets and novelists replace scientist and philosophers as the instigators of new metaphors and vocabularies. This, then, is a palpably conservative view. Derrida by contrast takes the implications to be ethical, hence his concern with otherness, difference, alterity. In Levinasian terms he seeks to heed the call of the other.<sup>20</sup> Hence Derrida's insistence that deconstruction is an *intervention*.

---

<sup>19</sup> See for example Rorty (1991).

<sup>20</sup> Although of course Levinas' notion of the other is in terms of the infinite, the Good beyond being which provides the trace, i.e. transcendence. See *Violence and Metaphysics* (in Derrida 1978) for Derrida's engagement with Levinas; Critchley (1992) for a discussion of the ethics of deconstruction in the context of the work of Levinas.



## The Principal of Reason

Against a popular (mis)reading of deconstruction, then, I would argue that it does not amount to some kind of postmodern irrationalism involving the rejection of the principle of reason. In fact Derrida himself explicitly rejects this view and indeed the very possibility of such a possibility. Deconstruction does however *problematize* the principle of reason, as he makes clear in his inaugural lecture at Cornell University ('The Principal of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils') where he emphasises the practico-political interests involved in the institutional production of knowledge. He argues that whilst it is true that deconstruction involves a rejection of Kant's view of philosophy as the 'disinterested voice of reason' and that it problematizes 'pure reason' but this is not the same as rejecting reason out of hand. To do so would preclude the possibility of rational critique and serve to support the status quo, which is decidedly not what deconstruction aims to do. Nor might I add is it an unintended consequence.<sup>21</sup> The point is that deconstruction challenges the ideal of 'pure reason' as some sort of ultimate ground. Therefore, *contra* Pierce, for instance, whom he quotes as saying, "One cannot very well demand a reason for reasonableness itself", for Derrida reason and rationality become *historically specific*, and he aims rather to expose the repressions and distortions involved in the notion of pure reason. In this sense, then, Derrida's relation to Kant can be interpreted, not as some would have it as an outright rejection of Kantian conceptual critique (e.g. Rorty), nor as continuing it; but rather as Irene Harvey puts it in her seminal interpretation of deconstruction, as "a

---

<sup>21</sup> Gasché (1994) also examines the implications of Derrida's questioning of the principle of reason and defends it against charges of irrationalism.

prolegomena to the deconstruction of metaphysics and the recognition of *différance*" (Harvey 1986: 2).

Harvey locates Derrida within, rather than against, the Kantian tradition by focusing on the ways that deconstruction relates to Kant's epistemological concerns. In particular his use of a priori, transcendental - deductive forms of arguments. She argues that it is not so much that Derrida abandons the Kantian tradition as that he reframes the Kantian question. Not only does he seek the conditions of possibility of Kantian critique but also the conditions of impossibility that mark its limits. In a sense then, she argues, deconstruction begins where Kant's critique ends - with the notion of reason itself. For Kant reason is the transcendental signified - that which gives meaning to everything else. This is despite the antinomies to which he himself freely admits. It is this which provides the grounds of possibility for metaphysics. However for Derrida the problem is that reason's self knowledge is accepted as fully present to itself, as unmediated - by the sign, absence or writing. Indeed it is this apparent transparency, the myth of presence, at the heart of reason that pervades all the main texts of the philosophical tradition that are the focus of Derrida's deconstructions.

However I do not mean to imply here that Derrida himself should be interpreted as offering transcendental arguments (as, despite Derrida's insistence to the contrary, this is often the case).<sup>22</sup> For, although there is a sense in which he does seek the conditions of possibility for metaphysics, he also and simultaneously seeks the limits, the

---

<sup>22</sup>See for example the interview with Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta in *Positions*. (Derrida 1981b)



conditions of its impossibility. That is, not only does he not posit transcendental entities, he does not posit *any* ultimate grounding.

*Différance*, iterability, spacing etc. are all attempts at producing non-logocentric concepts; marks in a chain in process, and as such do not signify an ultimate presence or originary moment, as I have already argued, but not explained in detail. Indeed these 'non-concepts' rather seek to mark the impossibility of any such founding moment. If we consider this point in the context of Gasché's discussion of the arche-trace it becomes clearer.

Gasché delimits three possibilities that characterize the arche-trace. These are that it constitutes: the possibility of any and all relation to an Other; the origin of temporality; the origin of language and sense. In sum, it is not a thing with a sensible existence it rather constitutes the system of differences which provides the conditions of possibility for meaning. Thus Derrida remarks, "[it] does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. On the contrary, [it constitutes] the condition of such a plenitude" (Derrida in 1974: 62 cited in Gasché 1994: 261, fn. 46). Nor can it be approached phenomenologically. It is that which allows speech and writing to become present, 'as such'.

In other words, Gasché argues, the arche-trace engenders those three foundational elements traditionally perceived as engendering themselves: temporalization i.e. time; presence (relationship with the other); and speech (language). *Plus* their absolute (and absent) others - absence, space and writing.



Most emphatically then Derrida is not seeking the transcendental conditions of possibility of knowledge in a Kantian sense. 'Structures' (which Gasché (1986) terms 'infrastructures') such as the trace are not structures as in the language of metaphysics and transcendental philosophy, (though the language used to express them is inescapably drawn from these hence the problem). They rather represent what Gasché (1986) terms an 'irreducible nonphenomenal' that it is not possible to explain in the terminology and premises of transcendental phenomenology. The thing that perhaps marks these conditions off from the transcendental is that they do not merely represent the enabling function but also the limits of such possibilities, their impossibility. Though note that this is not to stress their disabling function.<sup>23</sup> It is rather to mark the limits to reflection.

It may seem that I have rather belaboured this point. The reason for this is it is a very significant point that is difficult to get across and is often misunderstood. The general point is that *différance* is not to be understood in terms of cause and effect because it does not represent or imply some sort of generative grounding. It is better understood as a strategy. David Wood (1988) sums up the aim of the strategy as transgression: "to infiltrate *différance* into the syntax of foundationalist and generative thinking with a view to depriving it of its attraction" (Wood 1988:64). Added to this is the point, made earlier, about Derrida, acknowledging his own inescapable dependence on the language of metaphysics by invoking the strategy of writing under erasure. This would imply that his use of metaphysical concepts is in a restricted way and marks a recognition of their inadequacy.

---

<sup>23</sup> Mark C. Taylor (1988, 1990) does this taking issue with Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror*.

However, Wood argues that, all this notwithstanding, the claim that Derrida's arguments are nevertheless formally transcendental is not refuted. Precisely because they depend on the use of such terms as *différance* out of erasure; that is as effectivities in practice, as producers of effects. In which case, Wood argues, Derrida is making use of the transcendental notion of causality. Thus: "It is either that Derrida uses transcendental forms of argument in explaining the term *différance*, in which case he undermines his whole project, or he does not, in which case the force of all he says about *différance* (and its intelligibility) evaporates" (Wood 1988: 65).

However, whether or not Wood is right, I do not think the issue benefits from being posed (once more) in terms of this polarised either/or dichotomy. It is precisely such either/or dichotomies that *différance* seeks to avoid and displace. The problem for Derrida stems from having to work at the limits of, but still nevertheless within, that which his work puts into question. Hence, as he puts it in *Positions*, a term such as *différance* is 'impossible-unthinkable-unsayable' in the language of metaphysics, which is all that is currently available to us.

### **Ethical and Political Implications**

Deconstruction involves a rejection of the Platonic notion of truth as *alethia* (or unveiling), and the concomitant view of knowledge as representation and associated notions of foundationalism and universalism. It does, nevertheless, retain a strong ethical-political commitment. However an important question becomes: does the dissolution of absolute standards and universal truth entail the



abandonment of all discrimination, value and critique? I would answer no, and so, as I understand him, would Derrida. But does to argue this require a means of showing how, or in what sense, competing knowledge claims are to be, or can be made to be, commensurable? Or is such vocabulary rendered inadequate in the radically revised notions of truth and reference, knowledge and meaning that *différance* and deconstruction involve? Moreover Derrida himself insists that deconstruction is an intervention (see for example *Positions*, p.93; 'But Beyond...(Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)'). He tries to explain how this is so in his response to accusations of indifference to racism in South Africa.<sup>24</sup> He points out that deconstructive readings and writings are not simply concerned with analysis of discourse, conceived in a narrow sense, but with texts in his extended use of the term. "They are also effective or active (as one says) interventions, in particular, political and institutional interventions that transform contexts without limiting themselves to theoretical or constative utterances, even though they must also produce such utterances" (Derrida, 1986a: 168) ) Indeed a frequent misconception of the possibilities of deconstruction and deconstructive practice stems from the focus on textual analysis and Derrida's notorious pronouncement in *Of Grammatology* that there is nothing beyond the text (discussed above). To reiterate, this is often (mis)understood as reducing all of social life to the status of a written word or a book, and it tends to be forgotten that the very meaning of the word 'text' has been radically, strategically extended to mean something more like a general economy of meaning, in order to make clear his fundamental point that there simply is no aspect of social life or reality that is graspable without some sort of mediation. Thus

---

<sup>24</sup> See 'Racism's Last Word' (Derrida 1985)



Derrida states: "That's why there is nothing 'beyond the text'. That's why South Africa and apartheid are like you and me, part of this general text. Which is not to say that it can be read in the way one reads a book. That's why the text is always a field of forces: heterogenous, differential, open and so on" (Derrida 1986a: 167-8).

Nevertheless this remains an area of much contention. Although it often the radical political aspiration is often conceded it is the actual political practice that is involved that is the problem.<sup>25</sup> Of particular concern is the question of how in what sense are these political aspirations are to be operationalised. For example one question that is raised is whether deconstruction provides the means with which to subject institutional knowledge and social institutions to critical scrutiny, in order to contribute to the struggle for social change. However, in considering questions such as these, it needs to be borne in mind that deconstruction is a critical project in which the critical aspect stems from the process of reflection and incessant self-reflection. Although this may be perceived to be inadequate as a political project as Terry Eagleton, who is sympathetic to deconstructions political dimension, (despite being one of poststructuralism's biggest critics) sums it up, it nevertheless involves "an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its

---

<sup>25</sup> Many commentators make this point. See for example Dews (1987), Fraser(1989) Habermas (1987) Although I cannot attribute intentions to Derrida without recalling that Derrida has done much to problematise this concept by revealing the undecidability and plurivocity of all texts, including his own. Indeed this is a an example of his strategy of 'double bind' for he both expresses his intentions, specifying what deconstruction is and is not, and simultaneously undermines the interpretation of texts through reference to the authors intentions. What I do want to emphasise here, as well though, is that it is not that intentions become irrelevant; it is rather that the content of those intentions is itself subject to deferral as I discuss in relation to Derrida's critique of Austin in chapter 4.

force". Moreover, as he goes on: "He [Derrida] is not seeking, absurdly, to deny the existence of relatively determinate truths, meanings, identities, intentions, historical continuities; he is rather seeking to see such things as the effects of a wider and deeper history- of language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices" (Eagleton 1983: 148). Furthermore the implications of these deconstructive insights might be to highlight ambiguity where there was once certainty, instability where there was once perceived to be stability, but this is not, at the same time to deny the production of relative stability. It is rather to highlight the violence and suppression that is involved in that production. (Or maybe to recognise the significance of this instability as constitutive, as Deutscher (1997) does in relation to the philosophical tradition, and as Butler does in relation to heterosexuality, as I will discuss in chapter 5)

However it is not only the feasibility of deconstruction as an intervention that is called into question. Even among many who would want to advance a sympathetic approach to Derrida's political intention, or as Bernstein (1991) does, vaunt the ethical-political horizon that permeates all his work, and who accept that the search for *archai* and a fixed centre is futile, still persist with the question:

*How can we "warrant" (in any sense of the term) the ethical-political 'positions' we do take? This is the question that Derrida never satisfactorily answers. What is worse, despite the overwhelming evidence of his own moral passion and his willingness and courage in "taking positions", he seems to call into question the very possibility of 'warranting' ethical-political positions. Or rather, it is not clear how Derrida understands the practice of warranting our ethical positions. What are we to do*



after we realize that all *archai* tremble? (Bernstein 1991:191, original emphasis)

Deconstruction, in this view, contributes to the process of making the 'archai tremble', and is even accepted as seeking to avoid nihilism, but it is still nevertheless castigated for failing to provide us with "an orientation for avoiding this abyss of nihilism" (Bernstein 1991: 191). Indeed for Bernstein this abyss of nihilism is not only Derrida's problem, but our collective problematic.

However, since avoidance of this said abyss seems to depend on warranting our ethical-political positions, this criticism is surely misplaced or even misconceived. It stems from a failure to accept the radicalism and implications of deconstruction and it also seems to miss Derrida's point that deconstruction is always already at work in the philosophical texts of the West. As Bernstein himself points out, and indeed as I have argued earlier, Derrida deconstructs the Cartesian Either/Or. He does not simply capitulate to irrationalism, nihilism etc. Moreover drawing on Staten (1984) Bernstein differentiates between a concern with the overflowing of boundaries and the defence of formlessness. Deconstruction is concerned with the former, not the latter. Hence, "The point is not that we can get along without boundaries, but rather that there is no 'boundary-fixing' that cannot itself be questioned" (Bernstein 1991: 184). Surely there is an analogy here, with the question of warranting positions. It is not that we cannot take a position. It is rather that there is *no* position that can be adopted that is not itself open to question, to deconstruction.

Deconstruction does not, it is true, provide an essence or ground from which to build a politics; no normative position, as Nancy Fraser (1989) argues. Nevertheless, in deconstructing all such normative groundings, it does not necessarily entail nihilism and the abandonment of all value and critical inquiry. Indeed it is the case that it does involve an ethics - and can contribute to an ethics of sexual difference, as Diprose (1992), who I discuss in the next chapter, argues. Indeed it involves demonstrating that value is, in fact, an inescapable ingredient of any restricted and general economy, and cannot be stepped outside of, even as it alters the basis of critical inquiry.

Moreover, since deconstruction invites a strategy of intervention and reinscription, it is my contention that it can contribute usefully to the development of feminist theorizing about subjectivity, the body and gender/sexual difference.<sup>26</sup> The ethical basis of deconstruction lies in Derrida's concern with radical alterity. That which is excluded, denied, denigrated to produce stability, plenitude, presence. And it is this which is of interest to feminists concerned with the problematic of subjectivity, gender/sexual difference and the body, whose focus is on the exclusion of the feminine and/or denigration of the female whether in the simultaneous equation of women with the body and the exclusion of the body from philosophical discourse; or the neglect of sexual difference in traditional philosophies of the body; or the exclusion of women's experiences in the history of ideas, philosophy etc. (all of which topics I will examine in more detail in later chapters).

---

<sup>26</sup> This is despite Derrida's own notorious anti-feminism. See for example 'Choreographies' (Derrida and Macdonald 1982).



Without *différance*, and without the 'presence of the other' Derrida concludes, in *Of Grammatology*, that there is no ethics only ethnocentrism reproduced in the guise of an anti-ethnocentrism (p.139-40). Here he is referring to Levi-Strauss and his work among other cultures, but it could equally be applied to the occlusion of the question of sexual difference and the resultant exclusion of the female body from that which is traditionally conceived as the human (and on which traditional ethics is based); without this there is no ethics only androcentrism reproduced in the guise of an anti-androcentrism.

And this is where deconstruction and *différance* can be of service to an ethics of sexual difference and an understanding of the inadequacy of traditional ethics. For example, as Diprose argues, examining issues to do with surrogacy, traditional approaches to ethics do not address the ways that "social assumptions about sexual difference constitute women's embodied existence as improper and secondary in relation to men" (blurb at beg of *Bodies of Women*). The aspects of bodies that make them specifically women's bodies i.e. their reproductive capacity, positions them also as other to the generic human (male) body. Whereas "In so far as *différance* evokes a material remainder to the economy of representation which confines woman to the position of man's deficient other, then it indicates that the bodies of women are open to other possibilities" Though importantly, as she goes on, "But this openness of embodied experience is not an objective reality or a transcendental signified prior to and outside of, the work of signification" (Diprose 1994: 78). *Différance* as she makes plain is not about a pre-existing set of differences waiting to find representation.

However, despite her own defence of deconstruction and its relevance to an ethics of sexual difference, Diprose still argues that "it would be foolish to assume that the tendency for critics and disciples of Derrida to write embodiment out of deconstruction is based simply on a misunderstanding. The preconditions for that misunderstanding are no doubt there" (Diprose 1994: 79-80). For Diprose then this means that 'correcting' cannot be effected through highlighting particular parts of Derrida's work or of that of feminists who appropriate it. Since the focus here would be, in poststructuralist terms in the context of a problematics of place she argues, an ethics of sexual difference derived from this would need to attend to the conditions of the production of sexed bodies. Whereas it seems to me that this is not a shortfall in the deconstructive problematic. At the formal philosophical level deconstruction exposes the work of exclusion inherent in logocentric conceptions of ethics, logic, subjectivity, the body, sexual difference etc. It also exposes the role of the feminine as metaphor for that which is excluded (which I discuss in chapter 2) and at the same demonstrate the impossibility of its total exclusion (where could it go to if there is no 'outside'?) This includes the exclusion of the body as a matter of relevance to philosophical concerns as in the mind/body, subject/object dualisms even if those concerns directly involve bodies in the form of individuals e.g. in the fields of ethics, subjectivity, and citizenship).

Meaning, moreover, is in operation at the empirical level and manifested in social and cultural practices. At the empirical level deconstructions of the practices that constitute particular cultures and shape their social organisation can help us to see just what is involved in the constitution (not simply construction) of particular bodies in



particular ways (See for example Spivak and the practice of female genital mutilation, which is sometimes euphemistically called clitoridectomy and/or Vicky Kirby (1987) who also discusses what a deconstructive reading of such practices can bring to our understanding of them and the role of male power in the production and valuation of female bodies. I merely mention these examples here but I will discuss them more fully Chapter 2).

Perhaps a consideration of the point made by Derrida in his response in 'But Beyond...', to Anne McIntock and Rob Nixon's open letter to him about 'Racism's last word', mentioned earlier, might help to illuminate this point. McIntock and Nixon take Derrida to be ignoring the real situation by focusing on texts but he points out that 'real situations' are precisely the stuff of texts. Which point, of course, links to the earlier discussion of texts (mine and Derrida's) and Derrida's extension of writing beyond iconography or 'marks on a page'. This point cannot be grasped without an appreciation of this distinction and generalisation.

## **Conclusion**

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, Derrida's work is complex and rather than attempt to summarise something that hardly bears summary, or get into definitional debates around the meaning of deconstruction, I have focused on those aspects that can most usefully contribute to the understanding of gendered embodiment. These will inform the rest of my arguments throughout the thesis. Hence the focus has been on the critique of the metaphysics of presence on which logo- and phallogentrism are based.

This critique rests on the close reading of a number of texts in the philosophical canon that demonstrate that the notion of unmediated presence or (self-identical knowledge) is a myth. There is always an absence at the heart of presence (which Derrida often characterises in terms of death and ghosts). By demonstrating the graphematic structure of speech he establishes that it too is a form of writing. The privileging of speech over writing that characterises logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence is revealed to be based on the suppression of the role of writing in the production and interpretation of speech. Even this is dependent on a prior absence - the 'principal of death within speech' that he refers to in *Of Grammatology*. Speech is reconceived as a form of writing consisting in a series of marks whose intelligibility stems from their relation to other marks in a general economy of meaning. It is not possible to get outside of this economy of meaning. There is no meaning outside of interpretation.

There are a number of important points that I want to draw out of all this. These form the basis of my arguments in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. The first one is to emphasise that there can be no unmediated experience since there is no meaning outside of language and signification. Meaning is never simply there in the text or in the intention of a speaker or an author. It always involves a process of interpretation and this also always involves a process of iteration (which indicates repeatability but, significantly, not closure). Meaning is always context specific and can only ever be fixed retrospectively.

This is related to my second point that, although there can be no unmediated experience, logocentrism functions *as if there could be* by assuming that language represents reality, and meaning is fixed and



transparent to consciousness. This is a crucial point in the critique of presence and it is one to which I will return again and again in each of the chapters of this thesis. It is of particular importance in relation to the notion of undecidability because it is only in recognising the illusory nature of logocentric certainty that the positive possibilities of undecidability can come to be appreciated.

Deconstructive insights allow us to see the undecidability and ambiguity in the categories once deemed foundational and to reveal the violence and dissimulation involved in the suppression of those ambiguities in the establishing of certainty in logocentric closure. Undecidability and ambiguities are revealed to be constitutive features of the binary oppositions that found logocentrism. Rather than a logic of non-contradiction, a logic of supplementarity is at work in them all rendering them parasitic.

The third point I want to emphasise is that although these insights highlight the role of language in the constitution of reality they do not involve either a denial of reality in its materiality, or an insistence that it is only a matter of words. They do however involve rethinking the reference/representation, materiality/ideality dichotomies and questioning the status of the material world as something which stands outside signifiatory frameworks and shapes them. This is of enormous significance for rethinking sex, gender and the body, and for identity politics, as I argue in chapters 3 and 5.

This leads me to the fourth point which is that there are two things that prevent Derrida's account of 'writing' or language and signification from succumbing to metaphysical closure. (It is important

for my purposes that it does so, as will eventually become clear). These are, one, that there is always something extra to interpretation that cannot be captured in interpretation (and that extra is better characterised in terms of dissemination rather than polysemia); and ,two, the play of movement involved in *différance* and iterability. What the latter means is that while repeatability is necessary to the possibility of meaning and communication, the iterability involved in *différance* involves movement (temporization, spacing). It is not a mechanical repetition as would be implied in logocentric closure wherein repetition is a repetition of the same. This is precisely because meaning is *not* fixed as these deconstructive insights demonstrate. Such a mechanical repetition would depend on the suppression of difference and *différance*. *Différance*. and iterability open up the space for concern with the other of language; of representation; of philosophy; of Western humanism; and anything else that exceeds logocentric closure. This is an important point because it is this that allows the possibility of difference, of change and transformation as I will argue in chapters 4, and 5 where I develop these insights in relation to Derrida's critique of Austin and Speech Act theory and Butler's application of this in her account of performativity.

The fifth point that I have made in this chapter is that this view of language and signification does not involve the 'free play of differences' as is sometimes argued, but rather a way of rethinking the relation between identity and difference and the role of language and signification in the establishment or suppression of either. This is of particular importance for women because it is women who are located in a position of difference (as standard deviations from a male norm) in logocentrism. Indeed Derrida himself raises the issue of the sexual



structure of logocentrism when he renames it phallogocentrism as I discuss in chapter 2. Finally, the ethical basis of deconstruction lies in Derrida's concern with alterity as that which is excluded, denied, denigrated in order to produce stability, plenitude, presence. The political promise lies in the possibilities this concern opens up. Similarly, although these insights do remove the certainty of universal laws, they do not necessarily entail irrationalism, nihilism and relativism but rather an ethics of justice and judgment based on obligations and responsibilities. This can be particularly useful for feminists concerned with gender and sexual difference in the realm of ethics, as I argue in chapter 2.

These six points form the basis of my arguments in the rest of this thesis. The issues raised in them form important themes that will be revisited in relation to fundamental debates in feminist gender and body theory. I argue that the deconstructive insights discussed here all have positive epistemological and political implications for feminists concerned with gender and sexual difference (in chapter 2) and for rethinking the interrelation of corporeality, subjectivity and sexual difference in theories of gendered embodiment (in Part 2).

## Chapter 2

### **Feminism and Deconstruction: Anti-Essentialism and the Politics of Female Subjectivity<sup>1</sup>**

Derrida's work provides a powerful critique of patriarchal metaphysics and the dualisms on which it is based. It destabilises these dualisms, in particular male/female, mind/body, subject/object, and reveals both the masculine/feminine opposition at the root of conceptuality and women's exclusion from it (except in phallic terms). Thus both Derrida and feminists note the connections between the privileging of the sovereign subject, logocentrism and phallogentrism.<sup>2</sup>

However two major difficulties for feminists have been identified. One concerns the potentially disturbing implications of the radical critique of identity categories entailed in deconstruction. This amounts to a radical anti-essentialism that involves recognising the sheer undecidability of what is 'proper' to sexual difference. Identity categories such as woman are thereby revealed as normatively rather than ontologically compelled. Therefore, even as deconstruction,

---

<sup>1</sup>This title is not indicative of a tendency to homogenize the great diversity of feminisms. It is rather I hope suggestive of an attempt to identify some of the issues particular feminists have raised in their respective encounters with deconstruction and some of the benefits of feminist appropriations of deconstruction. There is a deliberately broad sweep in this chapter in order to set the context for focusing on the particular issue of gendered subjectivity and corporeality in Part 2 of this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> See *Feminist Studies* 1988 special issue 'Feminism and Deconstruction' which addresses such connections in a survey of the debates around feminism and deconstruction in literary criticism. Derrida draws this connection in *Of Grammatology*, in his discussion of Lacan in 'The Purveyor of Truth', *French Yale Studies*, 52 also reprinted in *The Post-Card* and deconstructs the man/woman binary in 'The Double Session' in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, London: Athlone Press.



importantly, foregrounds the salience of sexual difference in a philosophical sense it nevertheless also threatens women's very sense of themselves, ourselves, as women. At the same time Derrida himself poses 'woman' and the 'feminine' as a revolutionary force that does not involve a political programme on behalf of 'real life' women. This is the source of the second major problem. Derrida's apparently abstract parologising thus seems to bear little relevance to the 'real' world of women. Indeed it rather seems to occlude the category woman and deny access to women's experience. Hence accusations of masculinism, relativism, nihilism and political inadequacy loom large. The connection between feminism and deconstruction is therefore far from unambiguous and any alliance would necessarily be, if not 'forever deferred' (Bartowski 1980) then at least 'uneasy' (Brennan cited in Cornell 1993)). Indeed many feminists dismiss both Derrida and deconstruction out of hand. In the course of this study I have found this to be especially true of British feminists, (discussed in chapter 5 ) who, in my experience, tend to favour what they would describe as a 'materialist' position. This they render in opposition to a deconstructive enterprise, without, it seems to me as indeed to others who espouse this view, adequately taking account of the materiality of the performativity of language or, relatedly, the insights of deconstruction<sup>3</sup>.

Even among those more favourable to deconstruction the problem remains that although it would seem that feminists can use Derrida's work strategically to deconstruct androcentric theories and texts, <sup>4</sup> the

---

<sup>3</sup> See for example Jackson 1995, Ramazanoglu 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Hence perhaps the earlier impact of deconstruction in US literary critics circles where it contributed centrally to the 'equality versus - difference' debates (e.g. see Scott v Miller 1988)

emphasis on representation seems to neglect women's experience and the materiality of women's bodies. Plus the emphasis on both undecidability, and the exclusion of the feminine from representation, except in phallic terms, make it difficult to see how it can help feminists in a politics of *self*-representation which aims to establish a speaking position for female subjectivity. Or even, indeed, how it cannot help but actively hinder feminist praxis empirically. Deconstructing patriarchal or phallogocentric texts is therefore taken to be one thing but creating the space for women's self-representation or, relatedly, a place of enunciation for women, is another and the two are far from obviously compatible. Added to this, deconstructing the masculine/feminine opposition seems to suggest that what is needed is a way of thinking sexual difference that avoids the hierarchical relations that inhabit that opposition and the violence and exclusion inherent within them; a way, instead, of posing sexual difference in non-binary terms, in terms of multiplicity, as Derrida suggests in his conversation with Christie Macdonald in 'Choreographies' (Derrida 1982). But this raises a series of questions. What would become of the category woman then? Would this involve a move 'beyond gender'? Most importantly, would such an approach actually be of any use to feminists concerned with gender inequalities in a world that is in fact organized in terms of asymmetrical gender dualities, male/female dichotomies? Moreover, one argument goes, since deconstruction undermines or displaces modernist epistemology and the humanist subject on which it depends, it undermines both feminist attempts to establish a specifically female subject - or what De Lauretis (1987, 1990) terms 'a female, feminist subject' - and the very possibility of a specifically feminist epistemology.



Moreover the question of multiplicity is a complex one. There are readings of Derrida that take the destabilising of binary structures in deconstruction to entail a celebration of multiplicity, pluralism even. However it seems to me that this is, if not a misreading, then at least an unhelpful one. As Derrida's discussions of multiplicity in relation to dissemination stress, deconstruction reveals the instability of meaning but the significance for him rests not so much on noting some kind of polysemia as on noting the ways in which there is always an excess, something 'other' that is not fully captured, or fully capturable, in representation (as we know it).<sup>5</sup> Also troubling here is the utopian element involved, for Derrida goes on to admit that such a position - to posit a non-binary, non-oppositional sexual 'otherwise' - is utopian. However I have to agree with Cornell (1991) and Elam (1994) that this form of utopianism is useful here because it does not involve a fixed ideal but rather implies an elsewhere to the present sex/gender system, even as it recognises its current inescapability. The utopian it is thus invoked, as Elam suggests, as the grounds of an exploration in which notions such as woman are destabilised both ideally and empirically. It "demands the continual exploration and re-exploration of the possible and yet also the unrepresentable" Cornell cited in Elam 1994: 58). This matter will be discussed further below in the context of the political implications of undecidability .

In this chapter then I want to consider the issues that frame much of feminist hostility to Derrida's work through an examination of five aspects or consequences of deconstruction that [Anglophone] feminists have identified as problematic: Derrida's use of the 'feminine'; the rethinking of the reference/meaning distinction; the political

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example *Dissemination* (Derrida 1993)

implications of undecidability and a politics of 'indeterminacy'; a putative move beyond gender; and charges of nominalism and formalism.

### **Derrida's Use Of The 'Feminine'**

Let me begin by emphasising that for Derrida the question of sexual difference is a philosophical one. His concern as I have already made clear in chapter one is with presence and in particular the role and illusion of presence as a founding moment in philosophical thinking. However Derrida brings to this concern a focus on the ways in which the phallus is privileged as a mark of presence. Hence his disagreement with Lacan in 'The Purveyor of Truth' (reprinted in Derrida 1987c). Thus the logocentrism of *Of Grammatology* becomes phallogocentrism in *Margins of Philosophy* and *Dissemination* to indicate that intertwined with the privileging of the logos as presence is a privileging of the phallus as a mark of presence. Derrida demonstrates that the phallus and the logos are indissociable and as Peggy Kamuff puts it "thereby [it] indicates a certain sexual scene behind or before - but always within - the scene of philosophy" (Kamuff 1991: 314).

Of course Derrida is not the only one to use metaphors of woman and/or the feminine as signs of difference or otherness. As Braidotti (1991) points out, woman is but one of a number of 'others' such as the body, the senses, or emotions endemic to philosophical debate about difference begun by Hegel but perhaps rooted in Kant or even Descartes. Indeed Braidotti suggests that woman as the sign for immanence, matter, that which is amorphous and inanimate is one of



the central themes of philosophical modernity. In the current uncertainty of contemporary life and thought "the signifiers 'woman' and 'the feminine' are privileged metaphors for the crisis of rational and masculine values" (Braidotti, 1989: 89). Derrida therefore is not the only one to have sexualized the question of difference and make of the feminine a generalised philosophical term. Braidotti (1991) traces the origin of this concern with the feminine to the crisis of metaphysics, classical rationality and philosophical discourse.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as she argues, these have provided what Foucault might have called the conditions of possibility for the current theoretical interest in the feminine. Thus:

In the transition from the ideas of the death of man to the emergence of a feminine problematic in philosophy, fundamental traits of the patriarchal system become manifest: its chronic inability to recognize a state of flow, fluidity incompleteness, inconclusiveness and the relational bond to the other. And so there emerge images of the feminine, or the becoming woman to compensate for the void left by the loss of ontological security after the exhaustion of the classical subject. (Braidotti 1991: 140)

And so the trouble begins. This philosophical concern with sexual difference seems far removed from feminist concerns with sexual difference. Derrida's concern with woman, to reiterate, is as a trope for writing in the service of the critique of metaphysics and the Cartesian founding subject. He uses it to reveal the violence and dissimulation involved in the maintenance of the illusion of the centred, fully-knowing subject, logocentrism and the patriarchal symbolic order; and

---

<sup>6</sup> Braidotti (1991) situates Derrida among Deleuze, Lyotard and Foucault.

thereby reveals the ground of metaphysics to be undecidable. The question then becomes: what relevance does this concern with sexual difference have for specifically feminist enterprises?

Foregrounding the centrality of sexual difference as a philosophical question would seem to be in keeping with feminist questions concerning, *inter alia*:

(a) The exclusion of women from the philosophical tradition. (Indeed Penny Deutscher (1997) brings to bear the insights of Derrida and Butler on the instability of gender and applies them to the history of philosophy.)

(b) Mainstream insistence to the contrary. In Britain for example gender/sexual difference is a less than 'proper' philosophical concern, of relevance only for the mundane and women trouble-makers. This is evidenced by the fact that an interest in (say) feminist epistemology is taken as a sign of a lack of philosophical rigour - (note the space on the RAE panel where the feminist epistemologist should be.)<sup>7</sup>

Does Derrida's greatest significance for feminism then lie in his insistence on the centrality of sexual difference and its significance as a philosophical question? As others have pointed out what is to be gained from a theoretical position rooted in deconstruction that is not available to a kind of feminism rooted in modern political thought is this posing of the question of sexual difference as a philosophical one. This is an important element. What renders it problematic however for many feminists, to reiterate, is an apparent separation from 'real life' women in the world that accompanies Derrida's (male) appropriation of 'woman' and the 'feminine'. Moreover, an even

---

<sup>7</sup>This aporia is currently being addressed for the coming RAE.



more problematic aspect is that it is also accompanied by what Penny Deutscher (1997) refers to as a kind of 'constitutive instability' and Nancy Holland (1985) refers to as kind of 'a sexual undecidability' at the heart of what is conceived as the Western philosophical tradition. This poses taxing, if not intractable problems for feminists seeking to expose the 'truth' of sexual difference and associatedly, the experiences of women. Therefore to suggest that this concern with sexual difference makes Derrida's engagement with the canonical texts in the history of Western philosophy implicitly 'feminist', as Nancy Holland (1985) does, is a somewhat contentious claim, with few other adherents, and it is not one with which I am going to engage here.<sup>8</sup> My concern, in any case, is not so much with Derrida's own work per sé, as in feminist appropriations of the insights and strategies to be gleaned from it and from what is more broadly referred to as 'deconstruction'. However, although my particular concern is with the role of constitutive instability in the production of subjectivity and, relatedly, sexual difference, gender and the body, it is worth examining Derrida's use of the figure of woman and metaphors of femininity to see what all the hostility is about.

### *The Becoming Woman and Metaphors of Femininity*

I will begin by examining one aspect of deconstruction that many feminists consider to be the most problematic. Derrida's catachretic use

---

<sup>8</sup>It is however worth recounting her point. She focuses on Derrida's engagement with Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in 'Restitutions' in *The Truth in Painting* (Derrida 1987b) as a means of demonstrating her point. She emphasises that here Derrida is suggesting that it is precisely because Heidegger "does not depart from the metaphysical tradition in his treatment of women that he in some ways still remains within that tradition" (p.223). Her argument is that the undecidability that Derrida consistently highlights in the texts of the metaphysical tradition, from Plato onwards, is partly a sexual undecidability and it is this that makes his work feminist.

of the term 'woman', i.e. his use of the term woman as a metaphor for which there is no literal referent, and his use (from 1981 onwards) of metaphors of femininity and associated hinge words such as hymen, invagination etc.<sup>9</sup> I do this through a principle focus on, and close reading of, Derrida's reading of Nietzsche and 'Woman' in *Spurs*. Focusing on Rosi Braidotti (1991) and Kelly Oliver (1995) I consider arguments that Derrida's turn to the 'becoming woman' of philosophy, despite opening up philosophy to its hitherto excluded 'others' - "the body, unconscious, non-meaning, even the feminine" is Kelly Oliver's list (Oliver 1995: xi) - nevertheless still precludes the feminine voice or subject position.

Braidotti and Oliver are but two examples of the many feminists who have taken exception to Derrida's use of the figure of woman in this way. The main problems stem from a concern with the implications of this use of 'woman' for the concrete bodies in the world to whom the category 'woman' is applied - i. e. the, albeit diverse, subjects of feminism. What are the implications for both the historical experience of women in the world and for a specifically feminist politics? Is this as Braidotti (1991) argues, yet another form of 'unacknowledged masculinism' which paradoxically serves to maintain the exclusion of women from philosophy? How useful then is this concern with sexual difference and what are the implications of following Derrida's displacement of traditional epistemological assumptions as a means of reconceptualising the feminine in non-dualistic terms?<sup>10</sup> Moreover and perhaps most importantly in the light of these issues, is the use of the trope of 'woman' in this way a *necessary* aspect of deconstruction?

---

<sup>9</sup> In *Dissemination* for example he uses the figure of the hymen and invagination. See Cornell (1991) for a useful discussion of Derrida's use of these terms.

<sup>10</sup> This is a strategy advocated by Susan Hekman (1995).



Other crucial questions are: What becomes of the feminine when it is turned into a generalized philosophical term? What are the implications for female subjectivity and for affirming the feminine in sexual difference? Is Derrida's use of the becoming woman a form of appropriation? Does identifying the undecidable with woman and the feminine position them outside philosophy, as Oliver (1995) argues and if so in what sense does it preclude a speaking position for women? Is it the case as Oliver also argues that despite his overt attempts to avoid it Derrida remains caught within the logic of castration, in which everything is defined in terms of the masculine (p. xv)?

In order to address these questions and the arguments of Oliver and Braidotti I will now turn to *Spurs/Eperons* (Derrida 1979) to examine what Derrida means by writing like a woman.

### *Spurs/Eperons*

One of the things Derrida does in *Spurs*, as Spivak (1984) points out, is to follow Nietzsche in expounding the stereotypical, patriarchal view of the feminine as that which is elusive. He seizes on that now surely infamous, contextless fragment of Nietzsche's writing considered posthumously, 'I have forgotten my umbrella' to exemplify the point that without a context it is simply not possible to decide what it means or meant. He then uses this as a metonym for all meaning and, again following Nietzsche, exemplifies this undecidability 'as that which is ultimately elusive, undecidable, etc., as a metaphor for undecidability. Thus Derrida uses this notion of woman as his model for 'writing' as in his extended sense (as discussed in chapter 1), or, as Teresa de

Lauretis puts it, "for the critical operation of questioning, doubting, or deconstructing all truths" (De Lauretis, 1987: 48). In other words the 'becoming woman'.

Hence although *Spurs* is basically a discussion of Nietzsche's texts and Heidegger's interpretation of them, Derrida announces in the opening lines that his subject is woman. What he means however is undecidability. Woman is posed as the figure for undecidability. Derrida wants to show that there is no such 'thing' as woman and focuses on the multitude of meanings of woman in Nietzsche's writings to do so. He adds to this a discussion of the undecidability of the meaning of these texts themselves, as indeed any texts, to show that not only is the meaning of woman undecidable, indeterminate, non-essential, so too is the meaning of man and of sexual difference itself, even while, (most significantly for me) "all of ontology nonetheless, with its inspection, appropriation, identification and verification of identity, has resulted in concealing, even as it presupposes it, this undecidability" (Derrida 1979: 103-4).

So although one theme might seem to be Nietzsche's famous positioning of woman as 'the untruth of truth' Derrida's stylistic ruminations are not so much about revealing the truth of woman, what woman 'is', as examining the undecidability of the category and the impropriety of this as a question. This is an important point and one that is sometimes missed, especially where Derrida's position is confused with Nietzsche's. It is particularly important in connection with the analysis of appropriation to which I will come a little later. For now I want to examine Oliver's argument.



## *Oliver's Argument*

Oliver discusses Derrida in a seminal work that places him in the context of Nietzsche and Freud, and argues that certain of Derrida's and indeed Nietzsche's rhetorical strategies serve to exclude the feminine and woman. This is because they close off the possibility of a specifically feminine other. She argues that they like Freud "at a crucial point...fall back into a phallogentric discursive economy that excludes any active participation by the feminine or woman" (Oliver 1995: xii). Hence identifying the undecidable with woman and the feminine situates both outside of the discourse of philosophy. Not only is man posed as the subject, i.e. a masculine subject, and woman as an object, i.e. a feminine object but she argues, this is an intrinsic rather than contingent aspect. This is evidenced by the way each addresses a masculine audience.<sup>11</sup> Oliver also argues that, like Nietzsche, "Derrida's strategies of self parody are strategies of self-violence that feminise philosophy by emasculating it and in so doing presume that the feminine is merely the lack of the masculine" (Oliver 1995: xii). In other words becoming woman for Derrida, adopting Nietzsche's strategy of self-parody redescribed as autocastration, in this view involves adopting reading and writing strategies that are feminised by means of emasculation and self-violence. This results in *taking the place* of the feminine.

In other words Oliver argues that Derrida's use of the figure of woman in *Spurs* would seem to be a(n phallogentric) act of appropriation. This results in both precluding the possibility of

---

<sup>11</sup> Note it is not my concern to compare Derrida's position with Nietzsche's and /or Freud's here. I simply mention this to situate Oliver's argument. See Oliver 1995.

alternative ways of doing philosophy and continuing to exclude a specifically feminine 'other'. The point for Oliver is that acknowledging the feminine other of philosophy in this way involves a "double murder-suicide"; the feminine cannot be acknowledged without also being annihilated (p. xiv).

However, as I have argued above, Derrida uses the figure of woman as a metaphor for writing and *différance*, etc. - in other words as a metaphor for indeterminacy non-conceptuality and the non-truth of truth - and therefore as a means of subverting logocentrism. It is true, as Braidotti suggests, that his use of the feminine is not about the feminine personified in female bodies. Derrida uses the notion of 'becoming woman' strategically, as a means of adopting a philosophic stance from which to disrupt phallogocentrism. Phallogocentrism is based on determinacy, foundationalism, universal truth and unequivocal meaning, sustained through various acts of naming and appropriation in a (phallic) logic of non-contradiction that involves (masculine) identity and sameness and suppresses difference and contradiction. Therefore a process of questioning that determinacy by revealing it to be illusory, as deconstructive strategies do, undermines and subverts it. One of the ways Derrida does this is to 'write like a woman'.

### ***Braidotti***

Braidotti argues that Derrida's notion of the 'becoming woman' of philosophy that he develops in *Spurs/Eperons* is but "the most striking example of metaphorization of the feminine with a view to better assimilate it to a falsely neutral mode of thinking" (Braidotti 1991: 98).



And it is that I want to consider next. Although it seems to me that this accusation of aspirations to a 'false neutrality' do not take account of the radical nature of what is involved in the deconstructive process, this line of argument does find resonance with many feminists and identifies what in fact is problematic for feminism.

For Derrida, as indeed Braidotti acknowledges, it is the absence of any symbolic representation of woman or the feminine in the symbolic order that renders them viable counter-strategies with which to destabilise the symbolic. In other words he uses the term woman as a metaphor for undecidability to illustrate the illusory nature of phallogocentrism and *contra* Lacan challenge phallogocentric metaphysics. Woman is reinscribed to name the precondition for the functioning of the phallogocentric symbolic order and notions such as becoming woman and metaphors of femininity are used as a means of subverting the binary logic of non-contradiction on which logocentric closure is based.

However Braidotti arrives at her conclusion by positing this notion of 'woman' only in Derrida's earlier works. Drawing on Spivak (1984) she identifies two phases in Derrida's thought on the question of what she refers to as 'the receding origin' and the 'sexuation of the subject' and draws out their respective implications for his view of the feminine and Woman. The first is found in his earlier works (where and indeed because of it, he takes issue with Jacques Lacan and psychoanalysis)<sup>12</sup>. The figure of woman is used as a necessary alterity

---

<sup>12</sup>'The Purveyor of Truth' *Yale French Studies*, 52, 51-113 (first published in 1975 as 'La factueur de la vérité', *Poétique*, 21, pp. 96-147) also reprinted in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987c). Derrida discusses Lacan in 'La Lettre volée', *Ecrits*, Paris Seuil, 1966, vol. 1, pp. 19-78, translated as 'Seminar on "The purloined letter"', *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), pp. 39-72. Also see Spivak 1984 'Love me love

and as such the precondition for logocentrism: "it is the sign of the false necessity that allows the symbolic order to function along phallogocentric lines" (Braidotti (1991: 101). This acknowledges the sexuation of the subject and the importance of sexual difference. In the second, influenced more by Heidegger, Derrida posits the originary moment, that is the origin of the subject, in terms of ontological difference. However, here, following Heidegger, ontological difference is distinguished from sexual difference. Hence the subject is desexualized as sexual difference is regarded as derivative rather than *constitutive* of the subject. It is only the first phase then, Braidotti argues, that results in valorizing the feminine as a counter-strategy. The second involves both a celebration of the feminine and an attack on feminist positions. In other words it is the second phase where Derrida is influenced by Heidegger that Braidotti finds suspect and denounces as falsely neutral. It seems to Braidotti that what is involved here is a kind of 'double-dealing'. Derrida both posits the feminine as a metaphor for deconstruction and the becoming woman of philosophy as a stance or (non) place of enunciation from which he as a male philosopher can attempt to disrupt the phallogocentric tradition. Yet he simultaneously locates feminism itself within that very phallogocentric order the 'becoming woman' seeks to disrupt.<sup>13</sup>

What Braidotti finds problematic about Derrida's Heidegger and this distinction between what for Heidegger is ontological difference and sexual difference is that it involves assuming a certain neutrality, such

---

my ombre, elle' *Diacritics*, 1/4 (Winter 1984), pp. 19-36 who discusses this. See Braidotti (1991: 98-108) for a helpful discussion of Derrida's debate with Lacan; see also chapter 4 and 5).

<sup>13</sup> For discussions of Derrida's notorious anti-feminism see for example 'Choreographies', Derrida and Christie Macdonald (1982) and/or 'Women in the Beehive' Derrida (1987)



that the sexuation of the subject is differentiated from the subjectification of the subject, thereby "postulating a neither masculine nor feminine as a space which can be thought and envisaged" (Braidotti 1991: 106). However it seems to me that Braidotti is here confusing Derrida's approach with Heidegger's. For example in Derrida's analysis of Heidegger in a number of places Derrida takes Heidegger to task precisely for neglecting sexual difference<sup>14</sup>. For Derrida, as suggested for example in *Spurs*, the question of sexual difference is undecidable - even as in all ontology it is presumed to be both decidable and decided. That is his point. His work, in making the question of sexual difference a philosophical question, attempts to undo that decision or at least examine the elements that enter into its production. It also thus pre-empts the rendering of sexual difference as derivative of ontological questions that, he argues, is characteristic of phallogocentrism. Moreover because of this, and Derrida's insistence on an originary difference in opposition to the phallogocentric positing of an originary unity or sameness, he does not posit an originary unity or neutrality before sexual difference. His concern is with the way that sexual difference is presented in (negative) binary terms in phallogocentrism. What he picks up on in a positive way in Heidegger's distinction between sexual difference and ontological difference in his discussion in '*Geschlechte*' which is, as Peggy Kamuff puts it "a sense of neuter which is not simply negative (neither...nor) and which therefore does not imply an absence of sex. What is neutralized is sexual difference as a binary pair" (Kamuff 1991: 379). Derrida embraces this as a move towards thinking sexual difference in terms of multiplicity and dispersion, avoiding the negativity associated

---

<sup>14</sup> See for example '*Geschlechte: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference*' (Derrida 1983); '*Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing*' in *The Truth in Painting* (Derrida 1987b).

with duality and phallogocentrism; not as a means of rendering sexual difference derivative of ontological difference.

However despite these criticisms Braidotti is right to argue that Derrida's sexualization of difference does not relate directly to concrete bodies in the world and so it is worth considering her concern that this therefore marks a significant divergence from feminists approaches to the question of sexual difference.

For Braidotti, if the metaphor bears no relation to 'real-life' women, it is suspect. Not only is it not helpful to women but there is something pernicious about its use in this way. What it amounts to is a furtherance of the masculinist discourse of philosophy - a system which she reminds us is 'both closed and foreclosed to women'. Not only does it lead to Derrida's now infamous anti-feminism but it serves to further the interests of philosophy at the expense of the interests of women.

There are two related points to be made here. The first is that the different phases of deconstruction that Braidotti identifies invoke a chronology that is misleading. For, as Derrida reminds us in *Positions*, his work is not to be conceived in terms of linearity but rather more like a web, contrapuntally. The second and related point is that it is possibly more useful to see these two phases in terms of the two phases of deconstruction: reversal and displacement (which Derrida also reminds us are not to be conceived of chronologically but rather structurally). While reversing the male/female dichotomy and revalorizing the feminine may well be a politically necessary strategy, as Derrida himself admits in his discussion with Christie Macdonald in



'Choreographies', it cannot succeed as a goal in itself as some radical feminist thought would have it. This is because this would be to remain within the binary logic of logocentrism and perpetuate the hierarchies that defined women and all things feminine as inferior in the first place and which is not a contingent aspect but actually integral to logocentrism. What is required for radical change, then, is a transformation of the logic (paralogics), of the structures of thought themselves. Hence the need for displacement via what Derrida terms the logic of supplementarity or supplementary logic that inhabits such notions as becoming woman, and his other feminine metaphors.

Thus Derrida's use of feminine terms such as hymen, invagination etc. is not to reverse the privileging of the masculine in order to privilege the feminine as in a hysterocentric or vaginocentric strategy.<sup>15</sup> He uses them rather as 'hinge' words that demonstrate a paradoxical, supplementary logic at work. Supplementary logic is a key theme in Derrida's critique of presence in *Of Grammatology*. It involve the demonstration of it work in key texts that would seem to deny it (e.g. in relation to Plato, Levi-Strauss and Rousseau). Aspects that are taken to be derivative or supplementary are revealed to be rather intrinsic. In relation to binary logic this means that rather than either term being autonomous or whole in itself and oppositional they are in fact relational. Each depends for its meaning on the other and on the exclusion or suppression of that which would contradict this logic. This then displaces the binary logic of non-contradiction that characterises phallogocentrism. The significance of the notion of supplementary logic is that it is not just the binaries that are undermined but the logic on which they are based. Through this is

---

<sup>15</sup> See Jardine (1985) and Holland (1985) respectively.

revealed the violence, exclusion and dissimulation that is necessary to the notions of plenitude, presence, identity, subject/object dichotomy etc. that characterize logocentrism. To give an example to clarify this in relation to my discussion of the use of feminine metaphors and hinge words, in his discussion of Mallarmé in 'The Double Session' in *Dissemination*, Derrida uses the term 'hymen' as a hinge word, as a means of deconstructing the binary and/or logic of opposition, because it is a fusion, a both/and. It is what he terms a 'medium' in that it embraces both the terms of an opposition - in this case inside/outside - and thereby confuses them. This then is not to replace one binary concept with another which would simply repeat the phallographic gesture. It is rather to replace the unitary with the disseminated in which there is always an excess, that which spills over, which cannot be captured. That is "the always already divided generation of meaning" (Derrida 1993: 268). The same is true of the use of the notion of becoming woman, which, in naming woman as excess displaces the notion of unitary truth. Thus Derrida is aiming at displacement and his anti-feminism stems from a perceived need to move beyond logocentric closure (whether phallic or hysterocentric since both feed on posing sexual difference in oppositional terms) to posing sexual difference in non-dualistic, more fluid terms *within an alternative structure of logic*

Furthermore, in examining the ways in which woman and the feminine are represented and repressed, they become a disruptive force in what Derrida characterizes in *Spurs* as 'affirmative deconstruction'. It is affirmative in that the deconstruction of the man/woman opposition in Nietzsche's texts opens it up to the undecidability of



what is proper to either and the possibilities this brings for understanding sexual difference in non-oppositional terms.

Derrida provides an allegorical reading of the feminine then to open the possibility of moving beyond a binary understanding of sexual difference which, he argues, structures western thought and practice. This involves gesturing towards the possibility of thinking sexual difference otherwise. For Derrida it has to be a matter of gesturing, an opening onto, because the aim is not simply to replace one concept with another, or reverse existing hierarchies within the existing conceptual structure - characterized here as logocentrism and elsewhere as phallogocentrism - but to actually disrupt the conceptual structure itself. As it is not possible to simply step outside it and adopt a neutral, asexual, gender free position, since such a position always bears the masculine hallmark even while it effaces it, the aim is to mime the feminine strategically in order to reveal the limits of logocentrism and phallogocentric categories. In so doing it provides the space for future possibilities, as yet unknown and unknowable 'revolutions as yet to come' as he puts it in *Limited Inc.* (p.243)<sup>16</sup>.

### *Spivak and the Question of Propriation*

If I turn now to Spivak (1989) in 'Deconstruction and Feminism again' it might shed further light on this area. Spivak, who is often described as "a Marxist feminist deconstructivist" (Spivak 1987: ix ) argues that "feminism should keep to the critical ways of deconstruction but give up its attachment to that specific name for the problem/solution of

---

<sup>16</sup> Spivak (1980) discusses this idea in relation to iterability, citation, and the performative role of language in the context of the Derrida - Searle debate.

founded programs" Spivak 1989: 206). In this view she, like Braidotti, finds Derrida's use of the figure of woman in this way to be 'unacknowledged masculinism' but nevertheless stresses the need to negotiate with deconstruction (and other aspects of European anti-humanist thought such as Nietzsche). Her argument centers around a discussion of 'appropriation' in both Derrida and the Nietzsche of Derrida's interpretation in *Spurs*.<sup>17</sup>

Propriation is one of the main themes in *Spurs*. Indeed it is one of the main themes in Derrida's work generally and here, as indeed elsewhere, it is tied to the question of sexual difference. Derrida takes issue with Heidegger's notion of Being - Dasein - as neutral, prior to sexual difference, and his distinction between ontological difference and sexual difference, through a discussion of the question of appropriation. Derrida argues that Heidegger's view of sexual difference is based on a process of appropriation because the very possibility of sexual difference, and indeed ontological difference, involves the question of the proper. The question of the proper is therefore prior to both. Furthermore in each case it is undecidable.

Spivak argues that Derrida's use of the figure of woman then can be seen as an act of *naming* that is not an act of appropriation in the usual phallographic sense. Displacing and reinscribing the term 'woman' as a mark in the chain *différance*, writing etc. (that is as a non-concepts in

---

<sup>17</sup> Spivak refers to Derrida's 'non-concepts' writing, woman as 'names of 'the problem/solution of founded programs'. She explains: 'I put it so awkwardly because so-called 'political' academics will still insist that writing is only script and make the blindingly brilliant critique that Derrida ignores mothers talking to infants' (Spivak 1989: 206) She acknowledges that where she went wrong in 'Displacement' was in not recognizing the significance of this act of naming. Thus "I missed the fact that in Derrida's reading of Nietzsche in *Spurs* there is an insistence that 'woman' in that text was a concept-metaphor that was also a *name* marking the pre-ontological as appropriation in sexual difference" (p. 206).



the sense that it involves the play of absence and presence and is never present to itself) is an attempt to avoid the violence, *appropriation* and *expropriation* which characterizes the phallogocratic act of naming.

She warns here against making the same mistake that she herself made earlier. That is, despite a strong tendency to the contrary, deconstruction should not be read *only* as a narrative of the de-centred subject. It also needs to be recognised as a *morphology*. The main focus of deconstruction as a morphology is the graphematic structure. This is the structure of constant deferral and displacement and of repetition at the origin of meaning that is repressed in phallogocentrism. Derrida uses the term woman as he does others, e.g. difference, trace, writing etc., as names for this graphematic structure in which *all names are catachretic*. They have to be, precisely because they are produced in a process of deferral and deferment and in which there simply is no one to one referent or reference. Deconstruction then involves more, or rather even other than, the decentring of the subject. It is rather about the production of the subject *as centred*.

Indeed as I discussed in chapter one, describing the implications of the deconstruction of the classical subject of modernity as decentred has had problematic implications, most particularly a tendency to associate it somehow with the dissolution or denial of the subject. Derrida takes issue with these implications in a number of places. For example in an eighties interview entitled "'Eating Well", or the calculation of the subject' (Derrida 1991) he denies that the deconstruction of subjectivity involves the dissolution of the subject. Spivak, a little later, sums up the issues well:

You see, deconstruction is not an exposure of error. As Derrida says, and now I am quoting, "Logocentrism is not a pathology," it is the thing that enables us - except, if because it enables us, we say that it is correct, it would be a mistake. That is all he is saying. So that, in fact all he looks at is the way in which the subject centres itself. He is not decentring the subject. There is no way in which a subject can be anything but centred. But the fact that the subject is centred begins with [that] kind of unendurable error. That doesn't mean that the subject can be decentred. There is no such thing as the decentred subject.....[For] he is describing the necessary centring of a subject in terms of a para-centrality that cannot *be* yet makes the centring of being possible' Therefore, 'Feminism must negotiate with the structures of phallogentrism, because in fact that is what enables us.

(Spivak 1990, p.146-7)<sup>18</sup>

And it is the problem of how to do this that is the chief concern of this thesis.

Importantly then, what I think this means is that this does not stop others from using the processes and strategies of deconstruction any more than it prevents us from challenging those existing understandings of what it is to be feminine (or masculine), i.e. . the historically and culturally specific content of the metaphor. Indeed note, we can both challenge this unacknowledged masculinism and that specific content *via* those very processes and strategies themselves.

Nevertheless there remains the problem of the relationship between the 'becoming woman' in deconstruction and women as embodied

---

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of the deconstruction of the subject see Cadava et al (1991)



beings. As Kirby puts it with reference to Spivak's argument "I am not convinced that the name 'woman' can be thought of as just a name, a catachresis without a literal referent. I have tried to argue that this name, albeit a wrong name, is never immaterial. For if women matter at all, it is as this word's embodied realisation" (Kirby 1991: 100). However I would add to this problematic two deconstructive points gleaned from the above analysis of *Spurs*. First, the fact that there is no literal referent of the category woman is a function of the graphematic structure of sense and reference and an associated inability of categories to fully capture what *is* in an essential sense. Second, if the question of what woman 'is' is undecidable this then raises the issue of what goes into the production of woman as this words embodied realisation. At the same time it is true that individual women are produced and experience themselves and their identities within particular locations within the confines, or what Judith Butler would call constitutive constraint, of that words performativity. Hence the significance of the materiality of the signifier. 'Woman' then becomes not so much a 'wrong' name, as Kirby suggests, (what would be a 'right' one?) as perhaps a harmful one.

The discussion of Butler and 'injurious speech' in chapter 5 further illuminates this point. However, for now, one way of thinking through this problem it seems to me is to set it in the context of the problem of affirming the feminine. For deconstructive feminisms the key to the question of sexual difference lies in revaluing and affirming the feminine in *non-phallic terms* and the main problem within this is how to do so without succumbing to essentialism. Perhaps the answer to Braidotti's and Kirby's point about the feminine in deconstruction not being tied to real-life women is that not tying the feminine to real-

life women avoids attributing to female bodies/subjects a "humanist essence of womanhood".<sup>19</sup> It allows us on the one hand to deconstruct the symbolic operations at work in the exclusion/denigration of the feminine en route to its revaluation. Deconstruction is vital here. We also need to deconstruct the processes involved in the construction of femininity and masculinity and challenge the power relations that these differences underpin. This involves deconstructing the processes involved in both defining certain attributes as feminine and others as masculine, and their inscription on the bodies and identities of individual men and women. This will reveal the power relations involved and in so doing open up the possibility for resistance, challenge and transformation. (These power relations are inherent within the discursive practices that structure our lives and are constitutive of our being as women or indeed as men.)

This brings me back to the initial point I raised at the start of this chapter concerning the threat to women's sense of ourselves as women that accompanies the critique of identity categories involved in deconstruction. Indeed it is this that makes the whole problem of rethinking sexual difference, posing it 'otherwise', so intractable and apparently politically unpropitious for women.

### **Materiality and Ideality**

What is at issue in the debates of the previous section is the distinction between materiality and ideality, meaning and reference, theory and practice. This distinction has been an important aspect in the

---

<sup>19</sup>Chris Weedon uses this phrase (1987: 81).



continued occlusion of sexual difference, gender and the body from philosophical significance and the realm of pure reason, pure consciousness and theory, or whatever. It has also been an important aspect in feminist reluctance to embrace Derridian insights. To fully appreciate the significance of deconstruction and deconstructive strategies for feminists concerned with gender/sexual difference and the body involves accepting the significance of the deconstruction of the reference/meaning dichotomy (see chapters 3 and 5 for further discussion on this matter). This distinction neglects the effects of the materiality of meaning. That is it does not accommodate the impact of meaning (words, signifiers, discourses, frameworks of thinking etc.) on materiality ('things').

What is being contested in the deconstructive move is the idea that there is a referent that stands outside of the system of meaning and in some way renders those meanings true or false; that there is an unmediated reality that meaning refers to and that a distinction can be made between objects in the world and the system of meaning through which we make sense of them. In structuralist terms this is the distinction between the sign and the signifier on the one hand and the referent on the other. In deconstruction this distinction is rejected. Indeed this is the defining characteristic that marks the move from structuralism to poststructuralism (which could be said to be deconstruction's theoretical allegiance, as it were).<sup>20</sup> The argument

---

<sup>20</sup>It is not my concern to debate the relative merits of the various approaches embraced within the term poststructuralism or to debate its meaning in any depth. It is rather my aim to demonstrate the merits of approaching the question of theorising gender and the body from a feminist perspective building on and adapting insights taken from the work of Jacques Derrida. His work often attracts the label poststructuralist and I have no argument to make against that. Nor do I consider the question of postmodernism, either in terms of an epochal shift from the modern to the postmodern, or in terms of the philosophical underpinnings of this putative shift. Again, I am interested in the insights to be gleaned from Derrida's work, not broad-based categories to describe it.

from poststructuralism is that reality, the referent, is socially constructed, produced through meanings, which themselves have a materiality: the materiality of the signifier.

From a deconstructive perspective the focus would be on the way that objects, and subjects, in the world (in this case the body, sex, gender, the 'I' that founds the Cartesian subject) come to be through those systems of meaning. This is because the basic premise is not simply the Kantian idea that we cannot have access to an unmediated reality (or materiality) it is rather that there is *no unmediated reality*. Reality is interpretation all the way down. It is mediated through language even as, in Derridian terms, reality is never fully captured by language. Hence what is described as the failure of representation.

Derrida develops his analysis of the way this works through the performativity of language: performative acts bring into being, that which they name. I will discuss this in more detail in chapters 4 and 5. For now I want to emphasise that a highly significant aspect of this though, for me and for my argument in this thesis, is that this is not a *totalising* gesture. It involves acknowledging also the ultimate failure of representation, in this case the performative and, relatedly, acknowledging that there is an originary violence at work in the production of meaning. (This also relates to the analysis of *différance* and dissemination discussed in chapter 1). If these insights are applied to the concerns of this chapter it becomes clear that the reference/meaning dichotomy is inadequate to understanding the production of gendered subjectivities, embodied men and women, and the ways in which these aspects are intrinsically interwoven with racial, class and a myriad other socially produced bodily inscriptions.



Indeed Spivak (1987, 1989) turns to deconstruction in order to avoid essentialist notions of women. Moreover, *pace* other widespread (mis)understandings of deconstruction, she demonstrates that, far from precluding attention to experience, deconstructive strategies actually enable attention to be paid to the experience of specifically female bodies. Thus Spivak uses deconstruction as a means of attending to the corporeal specificity of specifically female bodies whilst simultaneously avoiding essentialism yet retaining an economic analysis. The point is that essentialist notions of women are rejected since the meaning of 'woman' is produced within an unstable process of deferral and deferment rather than by any originary, essential moment. Moreover, understanding the production of meaning in this way, she argues, enables attention to mediating factors in women's experiences of their own bodies and the functions of this for multinational capitalism. For example Spivak demonstrates the role male censorship plays in women's experience of their bodies in relation to the practice of clitoridectomy and other practices of female genital mutilation. In 'French Feminism in an International Frame' she tries to 'bridge the gap' between the apparently abstract speculations of French 'feminists' Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray and the materiality of patriarchal capitalist social organisation and practices (Spivak 1987). She does this by discussing the parallels between practices of clitoridectomy and other forms of female genital mutilation in Third world countries and the theoretical effacement of the clitoris in Western discourses on sexuality and femininity that the feminists she discusses attempt in different ways to reclaim. These discourses, it is argued, structure the social organisation, institutions and practices that support contemporary multinational capitalism.

One of the ways they do this is through 'the uterine norm of womanhood'. Spivak argues that this 'uterine norm of womanhood' is based on the effacement of the clitoris as either the site or the possibility of women's autonomous sexuality; and womanhood. She discerns a uterine social organization at work which is explained as "the arrangement of the world in terms of the reproduction of future generations, where the uterus is the chief agent and means of production" (p.152). This arrangement cannot simply be written off and replaced with clitoral social organization, rather it needs to be situated so that its dependence on the exclusion of a clitoral organization is understood. Moreover, she argues, "Investigation of the effacement of the clitoris - where clitoridectomy is a metonym for women's definition as 'legal object as subject of reproduction' would persistently seek to de-normalize the uterine social organization" (p.153).

She argues that this uterine norm of womanhood supports the 'phallic norm of capitalism' (p.153) thus capitalist economics hinges on home-ownership and the nuclear family in the West whilst,

At the other end of the spectrum, it is this ideologico-material repression of the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that operates the specific oppression of women, as the lowest level of the cheap labour that the multi-national corporations employ by remote control in the abstraction of absolute surplus-value in the less developed countries. (Spivak 1987: 153)

Her point is that clitoridectomy is presupposed by both patriarchy and the family. Therefore in her view, in order to work 'against sexism and for feminism' feminists need to develop heterogeneous sex



analyses so that the suppression of women in excess (the clitoris, sexual desire, fulfillment outside, beyond, alongside reproductive sexual relations ) is "pursued in all its 'historical', 'political', and social dimensions" and in so doing undo the ideologico-material opposition.

To put this another way, as Bennett (1992) does "the issue of clitoridectomy - whether taken literally or figuratively, whether performed on the body or through language - is consequently the place where politics and theory come together" (Bennett 1993: 11). However although I would agree that the theoretical and practical effacement of the clitoris is of significance for feminist analyses and investigating this effacement is perhaps a necessary endeavour in revisioning female sexuality and subjectivity and indeed the category woman. I would also argue that this is but one strategy among others in developing a theory of embodied subjectivity that can and does, take account of sexual difference. Furthermore, the trouble is that to simply replace the phallus with the clitoris as a physical site of female sexual agency, as Bennett seems to suggest, is to continue to speak in phallic terms. A dualistic understanding of sexuality and sexual difference is retained along with the male focus on the end result, i.e. orgasm, rather than the whole multitude of events that are involved in female sexuality, erotic experience and desire.

### **Gender/Beyond Gender**

Having examined the main problems associated with Derrida's use of the feminine, and the implications of deconstructive strategies for the theory/practice distinction, I now want to consider the implications of the undecidability of women for feminist use of the category woman.

Of particular concern is whether this radical anti-essentialism requires a move beyond gender and/or the abandonment of woman as a generic term. This involves examining how these issues impact on debates within feminism around the difficulties inherent in the use of category woman, and the move beyond gender that relinquishing this category would involve.

The use of woman as generic category has for some time proved problematic for feminist praxis. For example, Elizabeth Spelman (1988) in her seminal contribution to feminist theory argues forcefully against homogenizing the category woman. She cites Gwendoline Brooks saying "The juice from tomatoes is not called merely *juice*. It is always called TOMATO juice" (Spelman 1988: 187, original emphases) Her point is that there simply is no such thing as the essential woman. To think in terms of generic women is simply to perpetuate the kind of hierarchies and exclusions that accompanied the notion of generic man. Indeed, whereas in this case generic man turned out to be white middle-class western men; generic woman on closer analysis is identifiable as white, middle-class western' woman. so excluding all those that need(ed) a qualifier- 'Black' women, 'Hispanic' women, 'Asian American' women, 'poor' women are examples Spelman cites in her critique of this additive view. Her argument recalls early feminist attempts to redress the occlusion of women in this way and which soon implied the need for wholesale transformation conceptually, methodologically, epistemologically. This is similar to what has happened with the question of gender and the category woman. Many feminists insist it is politically necessary to unite around the category woman and construe such challenges to it in often hostile, or at least negative, terms as politically disabling. However it



seems to me that if we accept the insights of deconstruction about the construction of meaning and subjectivity, we can have a way of thinking 'woman' without essentialising or biologising the category.

Hence, deconstruction highlights the difficulties inherent in 'knowing' women. *Spurs*, for example, as I have discussed above, renders the category of woman undecidable. Perhaps more importantly it also marks the uncontainability of *women* in the category *woman* and involves the displacement of metaphysical dualisms such as man/woman. But this is not to say that the use of the category woman is necessarily eliminated altogether, as for example Scholes (1994) argues in a discussion of *Spurs*. Scholes is led to this conclusion by arguing that to do away with essences altogether precludes the use of man and woman as ideal types since we could no longer distinguish man and woman in those terms. However the point I would want to make is that exposing the social production and construction of supposedly essential characteristics in both an empirical sense and a conceptual sense undermines phallogocentric notions of essentialism and paves the way for their disruption and displacement while simultaneously revealing the violence and gender hierarchy that pervades and produces such notions. Their root is thus exposed as lying not in absolutes and universals, in neutral 'facts' or theories, but rather in patriarchal phallogocentrism. Furthermore, although abandoning the category woman is one option, I agree rather with Judith Butler (1993) and Diane Elam (1994) that it is more useful to use it while holding it open to inspection and analysing what is involved in its construction and attribution to certain bodies. Indeed, Elam also rejects an earlier argument of Scholes' that deconstruction is incompatible with feminism as feminism is based on precisely the kind

of class concept ( i.e. woman) that deconstruction 'does away with' in favour of the view that "feminist analysis must be a deconstruction of representation that keeps the category of women incessantly in question, as a permanently contested site of meaning" (Elam 1994: 41). Indeed I would say rather use it under erasure.

Elam is also right to point out, following Cornell (1991), that critics of Derrida sometimes confuse Derrida's reading of Nietzsche in *Spurs* with an adoption of Nietzsche's position. Whereas Derrida's point in *Spurs* is not simply that woman names the non-truth of truth as Nietzsche suggests but rather that "woman cannot be contained by any definition, including Nietzsche's name for her as the non-truth of truth" Elam 1994: 39 citing Cornell 1991). Elam's own criticism of Derrida stems from a rather different direction and one which she argues Cornell neglects. That is that

Derrida's text moves between *woman* and *women*....Derrida thus insists on the indeterminacy of woman in the singular, while at the same time proposing that women can be adequately determined by this single figure. Woman is indeterminate, according to Derrida, but all women fall under the singular rubric of woman. Derrida is cutting corners here in a way which marks a limitation to his concern for feminism.

(Elam 1994: 40)

Her point is that understanding the writing of women's histories as progressing ever further towards the ultimate truth of women is problematic, if not in fact untenable. This is because there is no ultimate endpoint and no determinate truth. Any history of women must therefore take into account methodologically the deconstructive insight concerning the radical indeterminacy of women.



However she argues that although Derrida is right in stressing the diffusion of feminine identity, and the irreducible and incalculable, he fails to consider adequately how such issues could be understood in historical narratives which are of necessity temporal. Her own suggestion is that since writing women's histories in the past, present or simple future tense involves grounding them in the truth of women, the future anterior should rather be employed. This is in order to "expose the *political* question of what women *will have been* and thus destabilise any claim to positive knowledge or restrictions on the non-category of women" (Elam 1994: 41).

This works because the future anterior both embraces radical uncertainty and its own transformation. As such it involves both a rewriting and the suggestion that it is also 'itself always already to be rewritten'. When written in the future anterior history becomes "a message that is handed over to an unknown addressee and accepts that its meaning in part will have to depend upon that addressee. History written for a public that will have to rewrite it ceaselessly" (Elam 1994: 41). For Elam this is a way of keeping the category of woman in question as a site of meanings.

The advantage of this position is that we can focus on the ways in which heterosexually informed gender ascriptions are not only imposed on individual women and men, girls and boys on the basis of medically assigned sexual categories but also importantly structure knowledge, social and scientific western thought and practices. We can then see that political action does not require mobilising around the category woman at all levels. Nevertheless we can mobilize around

the category women if we want to providing we remember what is involved in the construction of that category (as Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*). Furthermore to do so is perhaps a necessary but not sufficient condition for social transformation and change. Party political activism is necessary at the legal level but alone it will do little in itself to overcome gender-based inequalities. What is also required as deconstruction makes clear is the subversion of the category itself and an end to such binary thinking. And an end, as deconstructive queer theorists such as Sedgwick, Fuss and Butler remind us, not just to sexism but to heterosexism.

### **Politics of Indeterminacy: Undecidability, Justice and Judgment**

Another particular problem many feminists find with deconstruction is the apparent political inadequacy that its emphasis on undecidability brings in its wake, that I discussed in chapter 1. Since it questions the political deconstruction is conceived as itself either anti- or apolitical. In other words it is at worst reactionary, at best simply incapable of (prescribing?) concrete political practice.<sup>21</sup> However in 'Feminism and Deconstruction, again', Spivak (1989), arguing against those who would peremptorily dismiss deconstruction due to the lack of normative commitment on which to ground a politics, makes the following important point:

It is not just that deconstruction cannot found a politics while other ways of thinking can. It is that deconstruction can make founded political programmes more useful by making their in-built problems more visible. To act is therefore not to ignore

---

<sup>21</sup> See for example Rabine (1988) Poovey (1988) Martin and Mohanty (1988).



deconstruction, but actively to transgress it without giving it up.  
(Spivak 1989: 206).

Diane Elam also stresses the process and what she calls the 'abyssal scene' of deconstruction, and makes a similar point which recalls my argument in chapter 1.<sup>22</sup> She argues for the compatability of feminism and deconstruction and furthermore, locates this compatability in a politics of indeterminacy. This, she insists, does not entail an inability to act or a 'paralysing relativism' but rather a call for ethical judgments. She argues:

Instead of thinking of deconstruction and feminism as epistemological theories or political discourses which elucidate the functions of reason or the irrational, we need to think their relationship within the realm of ethics. (Elam 1990: 304)

Deconstruction does not provide normative grounds for ethical judgments as in a politics of determinacy but such grounds have been revealed as illusory. Ethical judgments are in fact groundless. However, not in the sense of being without cause or purpose, but rather in the Wittgensteinian sense that grounds themselves can have no grounds. Epistemologically there can be no grounds for certainty. Elam quotes Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*: "If the true is what is grounded then the ground is not true nor yet false" (Elam 1990: 304-5). Her point is that both deconstruction and feminism make us aware that although ethical judgments are necessary - since an ethical system is intrinsic to civil society - they are also precarious, part of a never-ending (infinite) (abyssal) process. Elam's answer, then, to the perceived limitations of a politics of indeterminacy is to insist that

---

<sup>22</sup> See MOP for a discussion of the abyss. Elam argues this with reference to Derrida's deconstruction of democracy in *The Other Heading* (Derrida 1992) and Spivak's (1980) discussion of *Limited Inc* in 'Revolutions that as yet have no model: Derrida's Limited Inc'.

deconstruction does not preclude the possibility of deciding, so much as highlight what is involved (and excluded) in the production of the decision. It is not so much a question of moving beyond deconstruction to make ethical judgments as a question of how deconstruction obliges us to judge and act without certainty, and with responsibility. If the politics of determinacy was illusory there would be no point in replacing it with yet another politics of determinacy. Hence she argues "To avoid a paralyzing relativism - I can't decide therefore I can't act - the politics of undecidability must, in some way engage with ethics and consider *obligations* and *responsibilities*." (Elam 1994: 87).<sup>23</sup>

This is not traditional ethics however. Ethics is posed in the sense of an 'ethical activism' which, she argues, is far removed from Kantian ethics which is based on a notion of the autonomous subject as free agent and from pragmatist ethics and moral philosophy. Ethical activism is however intrinsically political although the political becomes 'a foundationless activity of judgment'. "[T]he ethics of deconstruction and feminism is an ethical activism which requires that judgments be made, yet which does not supply the means of legitimating those judgments. No recourse to self-present subjects, natural rights, or transcendental truths..." (Elam 1994: 88).

Also involved in this argument is a distinction between undecidability and indeterminacy. This is a useful distinction to note. Elam makes it since she advocates a position of indeterminacy with regard to the category woman and a politics of indeterminacy and she wants to show

---

<sup>23</sup> See Dronsfield and Midgely (1997) for a discussion of *The Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, which includes an interview with Derrida in 1993 entitled 'On Responsibility'.



her agreement with Derrida here despite this by situating her understanding of indeterminacy within Derrida's understanding of undecidability. At the same time she wants to refute feminist disavowals of a politics of indeterminacy. Elam recalls Derrida's (1988) insistence in "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion" in *Limited Inc* that his analyses of undecidability do not involve some "vague 'indeterminacy'". She cites Derrida thus:

Undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations (for example discursive - syntactical or rhetorical - but also political, ethical, etc.). They are *pragmatically* determined. The analyses that I have devoted to undecidability concern just these determinations and these definitions, not at all some vague 'indeterminacy'. I say 'undecidability' rather than 'indeterminacy' because I am interested more in relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilized through a decision of writing (in the broad sense I give to this word, which also includes political action and experience in general).  
(Derrida 1988: 148 cited in Elam 1994: 83, original emphasis)<sup>24</sup>

Derrida is thus emphasising the undecidability of determinations as Elam puts it, hence the political appeal of this notion of undecidability for her. Applied to women it gets at the way that there simply is no essential woman, women are multiply determined in an undecidable and open-ended way. It is this that provides the basis for what Elam

---

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of deconstruction and pragmatism involving Derrida, Rorty, Critchley, Laclau and Mouffe see Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Richard Rorty (eds) (1996) *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, edited by Chantal Mouffe, Routledge, London and New York.

refers to as a kind of freedom in such a feminist politics. (Butler to whom I turn in later chapters would call it agency.) The notion of freedom however is revised. The subjective autonomy of a Kantian notion is rejected. This is rather the freedom of 'a collective uncertainty, a groundless solidarity' (p.84). It is precisely the undecidability of women that unites women. "The specificity of feminism is thus its insistence that the politics of undecidability (among multiple determinations) must be understood from a standpoint of indeterminacy, of political possibilities" (Elam 1994: 84). Ultimately then Elam argues that politics is about handling differences in the context of something like Lyotard's differend, and becomes in Derrida's terms (in *The Other Heading*) a duty in the sense of an obligation to the other<sup>25</sup>. A politics of undecidability in this sense does not, as critics often contend, involve a refusal to make decisions, but it does involve a refusal to ground those decisions in universal laws. In order to avoid the paralysis of relativism, in light of the loss of universal laws, it necessarily involves an engagement with ethics, and obligations and responsibilities. (p87)<sup>26</sup>.

---

<sup>25</sup> Derrida (1992b) discusses this understanding of the political as ethical in 'The Other Heading' in the context of Europe and democracy and memory. He discusses the question of justice in 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' in D Cornell, M Rosenfeld and D G Carlson (eds) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, London and New York: Routledge. In this essay Derrida posits justice as the undeconstructable conditions of possibility for deconstruction. Unlike the law which, in this view, is and must necessarily remain deconstructable. See Critchley in Critchley *et al* 1996.

<sup>26</sup> This notion of ethics is not that of traditional moral philosophy which is based on an autonomous subject. For useful and illuminating discussions of the utility of deconstructive ethics for feminists concerned with sexual difference and/or women's bodies see Drucilla Cornell (1991), Cornell *et al* (eds) 1992, Rosalyn Diprose (1994). Also Simon Critchley (1992) *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, who, like Cornell but without her feminist perspective, discusses the relationship between Levinasian ethics and the ethics of deconstruction. For Derrida on responsibility see Dronsfield and Midgely (eds) (1997) 'Responsibilities of Deconstruction', special edition of *PLI* Warwick Journal of Philosophy.



## The Trouble with Nominalism

Having examined the political implications of undecidability for feminist practice I will conclude this chapter by turning to the problem of nominalism. For many feminists the undecidability that is involved in deconstruction entails some form of nominalism. Linda Alcoff (1988) adopted this view arguing that neither undecidability nor nominalism can be useful for feminism. In her view, undecidability must necessarily lead to some sort of negative position and nominalism can only result in occluding gender once again. However, I think there is a problem with Alcoff's construal of the implications of what she identifies as the nominalism inherent in this view of the subject, namely a "rejection of subjectivity" (Alcoff 1988: 421) and the assumption that there is or could be a positive conception of the category woman that 'is immune to deconstruction'. Thus she says: "If the category 'woman' is fundamentally undecidable, then we can offer no positive conception of it that is immune to deconstruction, and we are left with a feminism that can only be deconstructive and, thus, nominalist once again" (Alcoff 1988: 420). Alcoff admits that "The feminist appropriation of post-structuralism has provided suggestive insights on the construction of female and male subjectivity and has issued a crucial warning against creating a feminism that reinvokes the mechanisms of oppressive power." But she goes on to argue that it nevertheless "limits feminism to the negative tactics of reaction and deconstruction and endangers the attack against classical liberalism by discrediting the notion of an epistemologically significant, specific subjectivity" (Alcoff 1988: 421). Thus she wants to retain some post-structuralist insights but rejects what she sees as a nominalist position on gender.

There are a number of issues here. One is that to dismiss this view of the subject as mere nominalism seems to me to entail an inadequate conception of both deconstruction and the performativity of language. To argue that gender is constructed in a deconstructive approach is not to reduce it all to words. Nor is it to deny the constitutive role gender plays in human subjectivity or to imply that this involves some sort of everyday optionality. Indeed precisely the opposite is the case as my discussions in Part 2 will make clear. It is rather to show that gender, far from being an essential attribute, in some sense caused by the body, is rather constructed through signifiatory practices involving a relational process of deferment and differentiation and power relations. But I will not pre-empt my later discussion here, suffice it to say, for now, that such charges of nominalism are also reminiscent of similar readings (in my view misreadings) of Foucault as presenting some sort of linguistic monism and they relate to the main issue that dominates this thesis and rejections of deconstruction as divorced from 'the real world': the issue of the relationship between reference and reality, language and materiality. The argument from those advocating a deconstructive approach is summed up by Drucilla Cornell in *Beyond Accommodation*, thus;

the deconstruction of a strong sense of reference, in which representation finally yields to the real, does not at all deny reference, but only argues of the way in which reference 'takes place' once the relationship between *Sinn und Bedeuteung* is correctly understood. Technically, then it would be a mistake to



confuse Derrida's position with nominalism. 'Reality' is not just a name we give it. (Cornell 1991: 85) <sup>27</sup>

However the whole issue of the relationship between language and/or representation and matter and/or reality is complex. As it is crucial to the argument of this thesis, it is a matter to which I return again and again. (For example in chapter 3 it arises in the context of an examination of the implications of the deconstruction of the biology/culture binary opposition for understanding the sex/gender distinction and the body; in chapter 4 in the context of the comparison between Foucault's approach and Derrida's; in chapter 5 in relation to Butler's notion of performativity and in relation to 'materialist' feminist's rejection of such approaches). For now I merely want to emphasise once again the point that Derrida's or indeed deconstruction's, 'linguisticism' - the understanding of 'textuality' and its role in the constitution of 'reality', subjectivity, meaning - does not entail either a rejection of the real world or a reduction of 'things' to 'words'. It is rather that it parallels the Wittgensteinian insight that in marking the limits of 'our' world language paradoxically "both gives us our world and yet keeps us from being imprisoned in it" (p. 76); and extends it by demonstrating the workings of phallogocentrism within this paradox (e.g. in 'The Facteur de la Verité' in Derrida 1987c), as Cornell argues.

---

<sup>27</sup> Cornell also goes on to argue "Put in his own language, the historical burden of our situatedness' which Derrida calls palaeonomy, would forbid Spivak's poststructuralist nominalism" (Cornell 1991: 85). This would seem to contradict my point taken from Spivak earlier. However if this is taken in the context of Derrida's analysis of appropriation and in particular the appropriation involved in phallogocentrism and especially the Lacanian appropriation of woman and her identification with castration in the symbolic, the further point Derrida makes in *Spurs* concerning the undecidability of woman and ultimate *inappropriation* of the term or stereotype within phallogocentrism, can be seen.

Another issue is that to understand deconstruction as simply negative is a gross injustice if not an out and out misreading. As I have shown in chapter 1, and earlier in this chapter in the section on political implications, deconstruction may be 'abyssal'. It may involve an endless process, but it is not entirely negative. It is often construed in this way by its detractors, it is true, but that tends to be rather because it challenges the grounds for certainty on which they vainly seek to cling, rather than because of any intrinsic negativity in deconstruction. Indeed one of the main themes of this thesis concerns the positive possibilities for feminist gender/body theory of the destabilisation that attracts this negative label (as discussed in Part 2). It is of particular value in terms of rethinking the materiality of the body and rethinking embodied subjectivity in a way that both acknowledges the salience of the body yet avoids biological determinism.

Finally, while the very notion of an epistemologically significant subject is part and parcel of that very liberalism Alcoff wants to attack, the deconstruction of the notions of essential identity and authentic core as repressed by society involves a focus on the *production* of our sense of identity and authentic core that can in itself be liberating. Although this is, indeed, often taken to be a pessimistic view because it challenges the notion of repression, and its correlates modernist ideals of freedom and liberation, it need not necessarily be pessimistic precisely because it avoids any form of essentialism, and opens up 'repressive' categories, to the possibility of resistance and change. Indeed, the possibility of resistance and change in a deconstructive approach is another important theme that resonates in all the chapters of this thesis. Again, I will say more about these possibilities in the specific context of the body and subjectivity in Part 2.



### *'The Violence of Rhetoric'*

Teresa de Lauretis (1987) is also concerned, though in a different way, with the limitations of deconstruction's 'abyssal indeterminacy' for feminism. Although she has now moved on to produce a seminal psychoanalytically based account of the production of lesbian desire this early discussion of deconstruction's limitations can serve as an example for general feminist objections. Her focus is on its perceived inadequacy in accounting for gender. Thus she argues: "For the female subject, finally, gender marks the limit of deconstruction, the rocky bed (so to speak) of the 'abyss of meaning'" (de Lauretis 1987: 48) For deconstruction with its emphasis on 'the violence of rhetoric', to use De Lauretis' phrase, and its abyssal indeterminacy cannot take account of gender. Since it operates at the level of rhetoric deconstruction is thus, in this interpretation, divorced from "history, practices and the imbrication of meaning with experience" (De Lauretis 1987: 32).

In other words for De Lauretis deconstruction is after all but a form of ahistorical formalism. Hence, concerned with developing a theory of "the female sexed or the female embodied social subject" (de Lauretis 1990: 267) de Lauretis is scathing of those who would embrace post-structuralist theories.<sup>28</sup> But is it fair to say that deconstruction cannot adequately account for gender for these reasons? This concern with, and rejection of, deconstruction as about abyssal indeterminacy or

---

<sup>28</sup> Here de Lauretis turns to C. S. Pierce and semiotics as a means of examining the production of subjectivity in a way that takes account of what she sees as the mutually constitutive 'inner and outer worlds of subjectivity' see 'The Violence of Rhetoric' in De Lauretis (1987). Although a discussion of this is outside the bounds of this chapter, I would just like to point out here that this view involves the assumption of an independent reality that has directly referential effects. Such an assumption is rejected and undermined in Derrida's work.

undecidability misses entirely the point that it is not that deconstruction itself produces this state of indeterminacy but rather that the process of deconstruction, by focusing on the margins, the strategies, the violence and exclusions at work in the construction of determinacy reveals the illusory nature of grounded foundations, essences, and binary oppositions. This brings me back to Spivak's point regarding the perceived inadequacy of deconstruction. It is not just that deconstruction leads to radical indeterminacy while other ways of thinking do not; it is that deconstruction makes us aware of how that determinacy is produced, in this case, in accounting for gender.

Although deconstruction does not provide feminism with a way of affirming female subjectivity or of establishing women's self-representation- whatever that may be - it does nevertheless, give us a way of understanding the indeterminacy of gender/sexual difference even while it is constitutive of our being, and of analysing how, despite its undecidability, gender/sexual difference is constructed as ontological difference within phallogocentrism, and therefore it is important to the whole task. It may not provide an alternative articulation of woman but it does provide the space for alternative ways of understanding the production of gendered subjectivity. In this way deconstruction can help us attend to the hitherto excluded matter of (gendered) corporeal specificity. In Part 2 I will develop these arguments in relation to contemporary feminist concerns to rethink the materiality of the sexed and gendered body and its relationship to subjectivity.



## Conclusion

The main concerns of this chapter have been to examine the implications of the critique of identity categories, and the radical anti-essentialism that is entailed in this, for a feminist understanding of the category woman and for the 'real' world of women. This is of particular importance as a negative view of these implications, and the threat that they pose to women's sense of ourselves as women, is the biggest stumbling block to a feminist appreciation of deconstructive insights.

This has involved a number of related strands, the most important of which pertain to feminist concerns about Derrida's use of the feminine and the category woman. I have argued that although his use of these metaphors may seem inimicable to women's interests he is at the same time trying to demonstrate the undecidability of sexual difference; to challenge its status as an ontological category; and to highlight the salience of the dissimulation of the significance of sexual difference for the Western philosophical tradition (and for the metaphysics of presence). I have argued that all of this is of enormous significance for both our understanding of the category woman and for 'real' women in the world. It does not necessarily entail abandoning the use of the category woman as a generic term, but it does involve guarding against the naturalization of the category and keeping its meaning open as a constantly contested site.

I have also argued that appreciating this involves rethinking the materiality/ideality, reference/representation distinction (a theme I introduced in chapter 1) and relatedly the theory/practice distinction.

This is the second strand in my argument in this chapter. I have argued that these distinctions have been important aspects in the both the somatophobia that pervades the Western philosophical tradition and the reluctance of many feminists to embrace Derridian insights. These distinctions neglect the materiality of meaning or language and deconstruction helps us to see that. I drew on Spivak, who demonstrates the significance of this for understanding practices of female genital mutilation in Third world countries. She indicates their relation to the theoretical effacement of the clitoris in the discourses on sexuality and femininity that structure contemporary multinational capitalism. This is an example of the relevance of deconstructive insights for 'real life' women.

The third strand concerns another theme introduced in chapter 1 and that resonates through all the chapters: the political implications of a deconstructive approach. In this chapter I have argued for the political utility of the undecidability and radical anti-essentialism involved for feminists concerned with the question of gender and sexual difference. The very fact of the undecidability of the category woman provides a kind of 'groundless solidarity' that unites women and that provides the possibilities for political action. This also involved examining the distinction between indeterminacy and undecidability to argue that a politics of undecidability does not involve a crippling relativism, and an inability to make judgments, as its detractors suggest, because it removes the grounds provided by universal laws. It is rather that, in recognising that those grounds were in fact illusory, a politics of undecidability demands an engagement with ethics and responsibilities in the making of judgments and decisions once grounded in universal laws. Further to this, I have argued that the undecidability of the



category women does not necessarily entail jettisoning the category altogether. What is required is rather to use it under erasure and to maintain a constant vigilance around its production as a determinate category.

Finally, I have examined and rejected claims that deconstruction is both negative and nominalist and as such cannot account for gender. This latter is a frequent criticism of deconstructive insights and it is another theme that resonates through all the chapters. It also relates to the second strand of my argument here because accepting the rejection of these claims involves accepting the deconstruction of the reference/representation distinction to accommodate the materiality of language, and then applying it to the problematic of gender and sexual difference. I begin to do this here, but I develop these arguments further in relation to the body in Part 2.

# PART 2

## THE BODY



The main concern of Part 2 of this thesis is to apply the deconstructive insights discussed in Part 1 to the substantive area of the Body. I want to show how these insights can usefully inform feminist theories of embodied subjectivity. In particular, the attempt to rethink the materiality of corporeality and the relationship between subjectivity, corporeality and sexual difference. This involves particular attention to two aspects of Derrida's work that have been the focus of Part 1. These concern the undecidability of sexual difference and the critique of its status as an ontological category; and the deconstruction of the materiality/ideality and real/representation distinctions and the challenge this presents to the status of materiality as something which stands outside signifiatory frameworks and shapes them. It also involves developing Derrida's notion of language and writing in the context of his critique of speech act theory and generalisation of the performative effects of language. This is considered in relation to issues of resistance and change and a comparison is made with Foucault's notion of discourse.

Many of the themes highlighted in Part 1 continue to inform the debates, and the issues which generate them, in Part 2. These include: the status of the real and/or the material in an approach informed by deconstructive insights; the charge of linguistic reductionism in an account that privileges the materiality of signification; the political implications of the critique of identity categories and undecidability; the question of whether a deconstructive approach results in frivolous play rather than serious critique; and the possibility of change and transformation

In order to demonstrate the relevance of deconstructive insights and the utility of the possibilities they present I focus on Butler's account of the performative production of embodied subjectivity. This also serves to demonstrate the limitations of feminist accounts which debunk the claims to materialism in deconstructive approaches because they privilege the materiality of signification, and insist, instead, that their own approach is the truly materialist.



## Chapter 3

### Subjectivity, Sexual Difference and Corporeality

In the 1990s feminist concerns with subjectivity have focused on the problematic of the body and sexual difference. The failure of the liberal paradigm to render women fully human, in a system of representation in which the abstract, gender-neutral, human being on which it is based transpires to be in fact male, suggests that rather than effacing women's corporeal specificity, what is required, after all, is to acknowledge it. Subjectivity, it seems, is irreducibly tied to the specificities of sexed bodies.

However this focus on corporeality does not imply an attempt to tie bodies to their biology. Rather, contemporary feminist theories of the body or, more inclusively, bodies, concerned with the problematic of sexual difference, address the problem of how to avoid such reductionism. They want to avoid tying women to their essential natures, rooted in either biology or the psyche, whilst still insisting on the salience of the sexed body to subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> As Diane Elam puts it, "The body must not be taken as the ground of thought, but nonetheless the body's inescapability must be affirmed" (Elam 1994:174). This then involves rethinking corporeality and rethinking the materiality of that corporeality. The problem, is how to do that. Traditional

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of feminist thinking around the body see Grosz (1994 : 15-19). Grosz discerns three broad categories; egalitarian, social constructionist and sexual difference theorists. Irigaray, Cixous, Spivak, Gallop, Gatens, Kirby, Butler, Schor, Wittig are listed as examples of sexual difference theorists who move beyond the essentialism vs construction opposition and in various ways attempt to avoid the mind/body dualism.

phenomenological approaches to the body have without exception neglected the sexed/gendered specificity of bodies.<sup>2</sup> How then are we to rethink corporeality in order to take account of sexual difference? How are we to think the materiality of the always already sexed/gendered body? How are we to think of sexual difference in non-oppositional, non-binary terms: as something other than simply a matter of two oppositional identities, male and female. How are we to think of it as both essential, as in inescapable, yet not fixed, cultural rather than natural, yet also material? This all involves rethinking the relation between the cultural and the natural, representation and the objects of representation, reference and materiality.

Moreover all this impinges on the Irigarayan problematic of how to establish a speaking position for women and in particular what it means to say that one is 'speaking as a woman'. Feminist critiques of contemporary attempts by male philosophers to revalue the philosophical 'feminine' by speaking as a woman (e.g. Deleuze and Derrida) demonstrate that speaking as a woman from a subject position that is in fact that of a man, is simply not the same as speaking as a woman from the subject position of a woman.<sup>3</sup> This raises the question of how to establish such a subject position and whether it requires an autonomous female sexuality.

The earliest attempts to establish a speaking position for women (as opposed to just Woman) through 'writing the body' came of course from the *écriture féminine* camp, widely maligned, misunderstood and criticised, in particular on the grounds of its biological

---

<sup>2</sup> Grosz (1994) for example demonstrates this with reference to the work of Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Lingis, and Deleuze and Guattari, among others.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Braidotti (1991 and 1994).



essentialism, as well as its apparent obscurity, abstruseness and political inadequacy. As a result of this questioning, so-called 'French Feminism', especially the theories of Irigaray, has increasingly been re-evaluated by Anglo-American feminists and others, concerned with the social constitution of sexed embodiment, and the possibilities for change this both implies and denies. They attempt to accommodate two key points - the Freudian insight that subjectivity is always sexed, and the Lacanian insight that sexed identifications are made through entry into the symbolic order - with phenomenological theories of the body, whilst also attempting to avoid the masculinism at the heart of these insights. They argue, for example, that underlying Lacan's account of the (albeit shifting) discursive positioning of sexed identifications is a male-female structure, a hierarchical gender dichotomy, which necessarily devalues and/or excludes the feminine perceived in phallic terms as merely a lack. The point is that sexuality, in Freudian terms, is *always* defined in terms of masculine sexuality. Hence the call for an autonomous sexuality for women. Moreover if these insights are linked to Foucauldian notions of the body and sexuality, disciplinary technologies, bio-power etc. (adapted to feminist concerns and thereby cleansed of their androcentrism) feminist theory is pushed towards a move beyond the essentialism versus construction opposition. This move renders more appealing Irigaray's step of accepting the Freudian basic insight, but rejecting the accompanying definition of sexuality in masculine terms and therefore attempting to affirm the feminine in sexual difference. Indeed it is this that sets the context (implicitly if not explicitly) for more recent turns to the problematic of corporeality, or embodiment and sexual difference which I consider in this chapter through a focus on Grosz, Braidotti and Butler.

The work of these three theorists marks a significant move for both Anglo-American feminism and philosophy in their attempts to rethink corporeality beyond sex/gender, essentialism/construction, biology/culture oppositions. For all three, rethinking the body to recognise the salience of sexual difference and the embodied roots of subjectivity requires change at the level of the representation. This stems from a shared recognition that dualisms such as reference/representation, empirical/symbolic are but misleading dichotomies that generate conceptualizations that fail to capture the complexity of the matter. All three want to escape phallogocentric categories and modes of thought. They all recognise that this involves changing more than just the content but the whole framework, the very logic that sustains the thought. Such change is necessary to the affirmation of both the feminine in general and female subjectivity in particular. The most significant difference between these three theorists, however, stems from the extent to which this is perceived to involve some kind of reconstructive project around the bodies of women. In particular, whether it entails the construction of an autonomous sexual economy for women as Braidotti and Grosz suggest, and which is of course Irigaray's move and that of her followers; or whether it is more fruitful to concentrate on rethinking reference and materiality as Butler does. Butler's focus is rather on the political effects of grounding the category of woman in the materiality of bodies and posing the materiality of sex as causal. She argues that one of the effects of this is the production of the duality of bodies that sustains reproductive sexuality as a compulsory order. (Which is why she is interested in, and a contributor to, what has come to be known as 'Queer Theory'.)



These are the issues that I interrogate in this chapter. Beginning, then with Elizabeth Grosz.

### **Grosz: Volatile Bodies**

In *Volatile Bodies* Elizabeth Grosz (1994) argues that recognising the centrality of the body to subjectivity requires rethinking corporeality beyond Cartesian dualism (both mind/body and subject/object) and the biologism to which it gives rise. She also argues that the Cartesian paradigm in neglecting the issue of sexual difference has resulted in a view of women's bodies in terms of a natural inequality and facilitated women's exclusion from intellectual and cultural life.<sup>4</sup> The ultimate aim therefore, for Grosz, is a reconstructive project around women's bodies and their self representation: to rethink women's corporeality as autonomous and active. This project is based on articulating the particularities of women's bodies and their differences from, as well as their similarities to, men's bodies. Grosz argues that this requires a reinscription and transformation not only of women's bodies but of men's as well. However before I examine in detail the precise nature of this reconstructive project around the specificities of women's bodies, I want to say something more about the understanding of both corporeality and of sexual difference that is involved.

---

<sup>4</sup>She argues that Cartesian dualism which pervades modern thought and provides the frameworks, either negatively or positively, for conceiving subjectivity and knowledge, gives rise to a notion of the body as either an object for the natural sciences, a tool or instrument of consciousness, an "animating subjectivity" or a signifying medium/vehicle of expression. None of these understandings of the body serve the interests of feminist theory since they all serve to collude in the social devaluing of women's bodies that accompanies women's oppression.

This focus on sexed corporeal specificity, involves an attempt to rethink the body away from essentialist, universalizing, ahistorical understandings of human nature or human being or woman/women. At the same time it demonstrates how these understandings have served in phallogentric logocentrism, in traditional philosophy and in intellectual and cultural history to dissimulating an always present sexual difference, and mask the maleness of the apparently neutral 'Subject' - 'Man'. Although this insistence on the centrality of the body to subjectivity requires a focus on the specificities of sexed corporeality it is not, to reiterate, a means of fixing human nature in biology as biology itself becomes a matter of construction and production.

### *Corporeality*

Bodies, Grosz argues "are not only inscribed, marked engraved, by social processes external to them but are the *products, the direct effects*, of the very social construction of nature itself" (p. x, my emphasis). She goes on, "It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type" (p. x). The idea of a real material body that stands outside cultural inscriptions is therefore rejected. Bodies, she argues, are *literally* constituted by cultural inscriptions. They have an "organic openness to cultural completion" as an essential aspect of their being and therefore "must take the social order as their productive nucleus. Part of their own "nature" is an organic or ontological "incompleteness" or lack of finality, an amenability to social completion, social ordering and organization" (p. xi).



However, in insisting on this rethinking of the materiality of bodies beyond any sort of binary distinction between an independent real and a social construction of that (albeit unknowable) independent real she is not saying that bodies do not matter at all. Indeed although she insists that there is no body as such but rather only culturally and historically, racially and sexually specific bodies, Grosz aims to get away from the notion of bodies as inert, passive products of cultural inscription. She argues rather that "They function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable" (p. xi).

To accord bodies this possibility while yet remaining inseparable from cultural inscriptions Grosz starts from the premise that animate bodies, albeit material objects in a sense, nevertheless, "are objects necessarily different from other objects; they are materialities that are uncontainable in physicalist terms alone" (p. xi). She attempts to conceive of corporeal specificity in terms of a kind of non-physicalist and non-reductionist materialism that includes attention to sexual difference.

Her attempt to redefine the body outside of traditional philosophical or feminist frameworks and avoiding any form of dualism then involves an inversion of the emphasis on minds and its associated aspects (consciousness, psyche, interiority etc.) She argues, "The wager is that all the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subjects corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious" (Grosz 1994: vii). Her point is that if depth and interiority are seen as effects rather than causes - effects that is "of

inscriptions and transformations of the subjects corporeal surface" (p. vii) - it can be seen that "Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds" (p. vii). And more for attention to corporeal specificity in this way involves attention to sexual difference in a way that explanations of subjectivity in terms of minds does not.

Indeed this is more than simply an inversions since the focus on corporeality here attempts to avoid the dualisms that inhere in explanations of minds and involves the radical rethinking of both bodies and minds. Grosz also rejects monist models which attribute the differing aspects of mind and body to a singular substance. To avoid either of these positions in her characterisation of subjectivity and the mind/body relation she draws on Lacan's analogy of the Möbius strip. (Many of Derrida's terms similarly problematise the inside/outside relation, e.g. invagination, parergon, chiasmus etc.)

### *The Möbius Strip*

Grosz finds the model of the Mobius strip, an inverted three-dimensional figure of eight, a useful way of characterising the mind/body relation as somewhere between the traditional alternatives of seeing them as two distinct substances or in terms of one dual aspect substance.

The Mobius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another. This model also provides a way of problematising and rethinking the relations between the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental



identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside.

(Grosz 1994: xii).

She aims to demonstrate both the necessary dependence of a psychical interiority on a corporeal exteriority and the relation of mind and body without presuming either identity or radical disjunction.

Moreover in arguing for the primacy of corporeality and a model of subjectivity in terms of surface rather than latency or depth she does not want to abandon altogether notions such as agency, reflection or consciousness. She rather wants to refigure them retaining a notion of interiority as well as exteriority.

Grosz sums up her framework in the conclusion to *Volatile Bodies* as attempting to accommodate both the interior or psychological aspects of subjectivity and surface inscriptions of bodies. And at the same time resisting dualism and monism whilst still incorporating a minimum of two, not necessarily complementary, surfaces which relate in a kind of power relation. (She does not explicitly develop this point about power.)

### *Biology*

To reiterate then, this insistence on the centrality of the body to subjectivity is not a means of fixing human nature in biology, it is rather the opposite, an attempt, "to extricate it from the mire of biologism" (Grosz 1994: 188). Grosz wants to rethink the body outside the confines of an ahistorical, universal biology conceived as the raw material of culture, avoiding the constraints that place it in opposition

to the mind (the mental or conceptual), and to rethink its ontological status as passive and inert. Her point is that "The body as much as the psyche or the subject is a cultural and historical product" (Grosz 1994:187).

She thus turns to the work of various male theorists e.g. Freud, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, the theorists of body image, Nietzsche, Foucault, Lingis, and Deleuze and Guattari who, broadly speaking and in various ways, present the body and indeed nature itself as pliable, incomplete "whose determinate form is provided not simply by biology but through the interaction of modes of psychical and physical inscription and the provision of a set of limiting codes" (Grosz 1994: 187). These codes do not present *fixed* limits since we simply do not know what those limits are or how they can be extended or overcome. By this she means that although there are some things that bodies cannot do, such as fly, and there are certain environmental features that their survival requires, bodies capacities are increasingly enhanced through the use of prosthetics.

Her argument is well summed up in this rather long quote:

It is not adequate to simply dismiss the category of nature outright, to completely retranscribe it without residue into the cultural: this in itself is the monist or logocentric gesture *par excellence*. Instead, the interimplication of the natural and the social or cultural needs further investigation - the hole in nature that allows cultural seepage or production must provide something like a natural condition for cultural production: but in turn the cultural too must be seen in its limitations, as a kind of insufficiency that requires natural supplementation. Culture



itself can only have meaning and value in terms of its own other(s): when these are obliterated - as tends to occur within the problematic of social constructionism - culture in effect takes on all the immutable fixed characteristics attributed to the natural order. Nature may not be understood as an origin or as an invariable template but as materiality in the most general sense, as destination (with all the impossibilities, since Derrida, that this term implies). Their relation is neither a dialectic (in which case there is the possibility of supercession of the binary terms) nor a relation of identity but is marked by the interval, by pure difference. (Grosz 1994: 21)

### *Sexual Difference*

The main concern in this refiguring of bodies then is the problematic of sexual difference. In focusing on corporeality Grosz emphasises the salience, the effectivity of sexuality both as what she terms a volatile, uncontainable concept and as a determinate type of body. Thus she not only argues that bodies are always sexually specific but she says of sexuality,

As a determinate type of body, as sexually specific, it infects all the activities of the sexes, underlying our understanding of the world well beyond the domain of sexual relations or the concrete relations constituting sexual difference. Our conceptions of reality, knowledge, truth, politics, ethics and aesthetics are all effects of sexually specific -and thus far in our history, usually male - bodies, and are all thus implicated in the power structures which feminists have described as patriarchal, the structures

which govern the relations between the sexes. (Grosz 1994: viii-ix)

Indeed this refiguring of corporeality, subjectivity and sexual difference has profound epistemological implications, not least in our conception of biology. However for now I want to consider what she means by sexual difference.

### *Sexual Difference and the Ontological Status of the Sexed Body*

As others have pointed out in phallogocentrism sexual difference is deemed derivative of human being. This allows for the notion of an abstract, gender-neutral human being that underpins phallogocentric thought but which feminist analyses repeatedly reveal to be rather an idealized male body from which female bodies then become a deviation. It is as if male bodies can somehow transcend their immanence in biology, 'nature' and sexed specificity, while female bodies cannot. So, as Grosz argues, to insist instead that sexual difference is not derivative, that there simply is no neutral being from which to measure the yardstick of sexual difference, then becomes both an ontological question and an epistemological one. However, does this mean to say then that sexual difference is ontological difference as indeed Braidotti (discussed in the next section) claims? And if so *how* is this so? What does it mean to say that bodies are, in fact sexually marked from the beginning? Can bodies be sexually marked from the beginning without entailing some form of essentialism? How can we think sexual difference as constitutive without being determining, unless we posit some essential form of sexual difference overlaid by culture? Indeed insisting on sexual difference as ontological difference entails such questions as:



Are sexually neutral, indeterminate, or hermaphroditic bodies inscribed to produce the sexually specific forms with which we are familiar? Or do bodies, all bodies (even non-human bodies, it must be presumed), have a sexually specific dimension (whether it be male or female or hermaphroditic) which is psychically and culturally inscribed according to its morphology? In other words, is sexual difference primary and sexual inscription a cultural overlay or rewriting of an ontologically prior differentiation? Or is sexual differentiation a product of the various forms of inscription of culturally specific bodies? Do inscriptions produce sexual differentiation? Or does sexual difference imply a differential node of inscription? (Grosz 1994:189)

However, as Grosz herself notes in a footnote, Derrida's notion of inscription or the trace pre-emptes the question of whether or not sexual difference implies a differential mode of inscription. For the trace precedes nature and culture in that it is:

not more natural than cultural, not more physical than psychical, biological than spiritual. It is that starting from which a becoming unmotivated of the sign, and with it all the ulterior oppositions between *physis* and its other is possible. (Derrida 1976: 48 quoted in Grosz 1994: 226)

Hence, for Grosz the question becomes: "My question to Derrida, then, is whether the trace itself is marked by or the mark of sexual difference. What is the relation between the trace and sexual difference?" (Grosz 1994: 226, fn 1). But I would rather suggest that this question is simply undecidable. The ontological status of sexual difference is undecidable. However the point is that sexual difference functions within

logocentrism as an ontological category. Therefore I find I have to agree with Robyn Ferrell's pertinent point: "The challenge that deconstruction puts to feminism is to show cause why it is not a condition of its theory that the truth of sexual difference be declared found" (Ferrell 1991: 181. original emphasis). The question of sexual difference then is not a metaphysical question because it need not involve speculating about what is in an essential sense or the actual nature of things beyond appearances etc. but rather asks about how sexual difference functions as ontological difference within phallogocentrism. The point is that while the former (essences etc.) are simply undecidable, deconstruction demonstrates that what can be got at are the forces in operation in creating the illusion of decidability. Deconstructing the conditions of possibility in this way reveals the violence and exclusions upon which the binarised version of sexual difference is established and opens the space for the possibility of disruption and displacement - what Derrida might call sexual difference otherwise.

Instead, however, Grosz poses sexual difference in terms of Saussure's pure difference, as itself ungraspable never present, but nevertheless originary, the conditions of possibility, the ground which makes possible sexual identities (and their external relations). At the same time it is this alterity that is "the very possibility and process of embodiment" (Grosz 1994: 209). Moreover, "it conditions but is also a product of the pliability or plasticity of bodies which makes them other than themselves, other than their "nature" their functions and identities." (p.209?) Thus, "Sexual difference is the horizon that cannot appear in its own terms but is implied in the very possibility of an entity, an identity a subject, an other and their relations." (Grosz 1994:



209). This leads her to argue that since it is originary and constitutive sexual difference is not so much ontological as pre-ontological and for that matter pre-epistemological. The point being that in making possible what exists it therefore precedes ontology while at the same time, in necessarily pre-existing and conditioning what we know, it precedes epistemology.

However Grosz also suggests that although she wants to tie subjectivity to the sexed specificity of bodies she does not want to tie it to two determinate types of sexual identity. Instead she sees sexual difference as an alterity that is both inside and outside the subject. Hence she seeks the "traces and residues" of sexual difference (p.208) as, "a difference impossible to unify, impossible to separate from its various others and impossible to seal off in clear cut terms' (p.208). Indeed, "Once the subject is no longer seen as an entity - whether psychical or corporeal but fundamentally an effect of the pure difference that constitutes all modes of materiality, new terms need to be sought by which to rethink this alterity within and outside the subject.' (Grosz 1994: 208) That is sexual difference.

The point she makes here is that if subjects are viewed in this way, as constituted in and through difference, then there can be said to be two kinds of violence at work . One is necessary and enabling. This is the constitutive violence of differentiation entailed in sexual difference, of the ineliminable differentiation of existence and becoming. The other is that which produces identity and sameness through the effacement of one group in order to incorporate them as inferior versions of the same. (She gives the example of women in patriarchies). This violence is both "wanton and gratuitous", and historical and cultural.

This being so such violence can be transformed through the counter-violence of resistance - as in the reinscription and transformation of women's bodies.

### *Change and Transformation: Bodily Fluids*

Grosz suggests that the disassociation of men from their corporeal specificity has led to the aporia of the particularities of the male body. She argues that in order for women to be accorded bodily and sexual autonomy men must also acknowledge their corporeal and sexual specificity. To make this argument she examines the 'corporeal styles, ontological structure and lived realities' of sexually different bodies, focusing on bodily fluids. She draws on Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* and her discussion of Mary Douglas 'Purity and Danger'. Douglas' sociological and anthropological perspective is translated into a psychological and subjective one by Kristeva who, employing her notion of horror, is concerned to delineate the cultural significance of bodily orifices, secretions and boundaries.

However Grosz criticizes Douglas for failing to examine the models of male and female physiology she is using. She points out,

But hydraulic models of absorption, of incorporation, are all culturally validated representations of that may make sense in our culture but are by no means inevitable. They all share the characteristic of establishing male sexuality and corporeality as the singular form, which is inadequate in establishing a symmetrical female sexuality and body morphology...Douglas view is by no means alien to or even very far from dominant biological models today. (Grosz 1994: 196)



She agrees with Douglas that sexed bodies and their fluids are never lived unmediated by cultural representations. But she takes this point further, pointing out the lack of a dual sexual symmetry in existing, patriarchal models of the body. It is this lack of a dual sexual symmetry that is a significant feature for Grosz. It is exemplified in the differential representation of women's and men's body fluids and the fact that women's body fluids are regarded as contaminating for men in a way that men's bodily fluids are not for women. Therefore to further her aim of establishing an autonomous sexuality and body morphology for women - one that does not involve positioning their bodies and sexualities in terms of a heterosexual structuring of male desire that sets them in a relation of passive dependence and secondariness - requires a rewriting of the Oedipalized body. However Grosz also points out that she is not suggesting a voluntaristic changing of the deepest structure of the unconscious. This she insists not required, even if it were possible.

Indeed the main problem with psychoanalysis at this level is precisely that it does not provide a way of transforming the structure of power relations between the sexes. This, Grosz argues, requires the transformation of the "sexually binarised body" (Grosz 1994: 202) which requires that men also make changes in their sexual horizons. She remarks on the significance of the alternative attitudes of some gay men to their bodies and suggests that different sexual practices produce different types of body. The point is that patriarchal, or as Grosz puts it "phallicized", masculinity involves the constitution of an 'impermeable body' that does not admit of the notion of flow as a two-way process. It is this view of the body that needs to be rethought.

Grosz suggests gay men in some sense move towards this since they do receive flow, as well as transmit it.

A body that is permeable, that transmits in a circuit, that opens itself up rather than seals itself off, is prepared to respond as well as initiate, that does not revile its masculinity (as the transsexual commonly does), or virilize it (as a number of gay men as well as heterosexuals, tend to) would involve a quite radical rethinking of male sexual morphology. (Grosz 1994: 201)

She suggests this is partly being done in light of dangers of AIDS leading to a focus on possibilities of non-phallicizes male sexual pleasure.

Rather than a psychoanalytic approach as a means to effect change, therefore, Grosz suggests a more phenomenological approach. Though she does insist that this approach is not incompatible with psychoanalysis. This involves a "tracing of the kinds of libidinal pathway across women's bodies that various corporeal flows make possible and in turn respond to" (Grosz 1994: 203).

### *Women's Bodies Inscribed as a Mode of Seepage*

Grosz suggests rather than simply a lack, as in psychoanalytic terms women's bodies are constructed in terms of leakage and flow. An 'uncontrollable seeping liquid' that is formless while engulfing all form. In other words as lacking self-containment in a way that threatens all order. Though note she goes on to qualify, "I am not suggesting that this is how women *are*, that it is their ontological status. Instead my hypothesis is that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage"(Grosz 1994: 203?). Moreover, she points out that



she is not hereby suggesting that women have been in some sense desolidified. It is rather to insist that although women as human beings belong to the same genus as men and as such have the same degree of solidity, yet as women they are represented in terms of seepage and liquidity, and they 'live themselves' in these terms.

To make her point she draws on Iris Marion Young's phenomenological study of experience of having breasts and, in particular, examines her use of Irigaray's 'metaphorics of fluidity' which aims to undermine what she describes as the 'mechanics of solids'. The latter supports Cartesian dualism and metaphysics of realism as in the mind body opposition and in the binarization of existence that is entailed in the subject/object distinction. The metaphorics of fluidity challenges this ontology and enables the rewriting of male corporeality as well as female. It is stressed that this emphasis on fluidity is not about emphasising the fluidity of female bodies as opposed to the solidity of male bodies. It is rather an alternative, non-phallographic way of conceptualizing bodies and existence. Grosz quotes Young, "As far as I am concerned, it is not at all a matter of making a claim about women's biology or bodies, for conceptualized in a radically different way, men's bodies are at least as fluid as women's. The point is that a metaphysics of self-identical objects has clear ties to the domination of nature in which the domination of women has been implicated because culture has projected onto us identification with the abject body" (Young 1990: 192-3 quoted in Grosz 1994: 205). Since women's bodies are represented in terms of flows and seepages part of establishing a dual sexual symmetry in which the specificities of male bodies are recognized involves men taking "responsibility for and pleasure in the forms of seepage that are

their own."(Grosz 1994: 202) Rather than simply reducing them to by products of pleasure and raw materials of reproduction as in the model of an impermeable (solid) male body and permeable (fluid) female body.

### **Problems with this account**

To reiterate, the ultimate aim for Grosz then is a reconstructive project around women's bodies, to establish independence and autonomy for women that is precluded in patriarchal frameworks. She argues that an autonomous notion of female subjectivity, sexuality, corporeality and their self representation requires the articulation of the peculiarities of women's bodies and their differences from, as well as their similarities to, men's bodies. However it is this notion of 'women's autonomous self-representation' that presents the greatest problem for this account. For not only does the insistence that she does not mean to imply two disparate identities in sexual difference sit uneasily with Grosz' focus on male and female bodies and reconstructive project around women, surely demanding autonomy and self representation for women in this way remains stuck, ultimately in the dichotomies of binary thinking. Although it is argued that cultural marks of sexual difference are biologically arbitrary, sexual difference is nevertheless deemed irreducible, marked by 'irremediable' distance (p.208). It is thus simply assumed *sub species aeternitas*.. Moreover it seems it is the body that marks this irreducibility. This involves colluding in binary thinking rather than challenging it and it does tie women to their biology - however understood.



Moreover despite an expressed intention to avoid the 'mire of biologism', this focus on women's bodies as the route to knowledge about/of/produced by women may indeed suggest a need to rethink the metaphors and concepts that shape our understanding of the body, but it nevertheless ultimately falls prey to the sort of criticisms that can be leveled at all 'maternal thinkers': not all women live their bodies as a mode of seepage e.g. the contraceptive pill enables the cessation of menstrual flow, post-menopausal women also 'dry up'; neither young women nor old women ovulate or menstruate. Why then should this transient feature of the reproductive cycle be the defining one? So I would argue that while it is one thing, and a good thing as a means of challenging patriarchal (and heterosexist) assumptions, to point out the power relations and gender politics of encoding women's bodies as a mode of seepage. It is also homogenizing, constraining, exclusionary and oppressive, to build a politics of women's self-representation around such a conceptual framework and such metaphors - as if that were the basis of the 'essential' self, rather than that such a framework is itself produced as the basis of the female-self in heterosexist phallogocentrism. Indeed Grosz' insistence that male to female transsexuals are not women because they cannot 'feel' like women is based on this sort of essentialist view of the link between body processes, however conceived, and sex/gender; a link that has its roots in heterosexist patriarchal frameworks. This view is also problematised by the fact that many male to female transsexuals go through radical surgery precisely because (they say) they do feel like a woman. Hence the rejection of male to female transsexuals as women highlights much of what is problematic about this approach. That such bodies are not considered entitled to be included in the category woman but seen rather as 'posing women' indicates that a kind of

(binary) bodily givenness is involved. So despite Grosz' attempt to rethink the sex/gender distinction and the recognition of the biological body as a mediated, indeed culturally constituted matter, her notion of the female body rests on the givenness of sexual difference: and that givenness accepts the binarisation of existence. The question that remains then is this: Given these insights regarding the social constitution of the body, is there a way of rethinking the body within the problematic of sexual difference that does not simply accept it as given? Is there a way of addressing the project of sexual difference without relying on the notion of the female body given in its folds and fluids? Rosi Braidotti, to whom I turn next, employs what she considers to be a form of strategic essentialism around the body in order to establish a form of 'female corporeal materialism' but she does not ground her project in the specificities of bodily flows and fluids in the way that Grosz does.

### **Rosi Braidotti: Nomadism and the Body**

Like Grosz, Braidotti is similarly concerned with rethinking the materiality of the body outside of the material/ideal, biological/cultural dualisms in order to both recognize and rethink the bodily roots of subjectivity and to acknowledge the salience of sexual difference without rendering that difference in and of itself determinative. She also wants to rethink subjectivity in the light of the demise of the rationalist/naturalist paradigm, and the generic humanist founding subject that accompanied it, in order to affirm a specifically female subjectivity.



She too aims to develop alternative frameworks within which to conceive/theorise subjectivity in general and female subjectivity in particular. Frameworks that allow or indeed require, attention to sexed/gendered bodies whilst avoiding (mysogynistic) phallogocentric, metaphysical dualisms. They need to enable a rethinking of the unity of the subject and establishing a place of enunciation for female embodied subjects which is excluded and/or denied in phallocentrism. However unlike Grosz, who acknowledges but does not draw out the deconstructive problematic which underlies her project, Braidotti explicitly builds on the insights of poststructuralism while avoiding what she sees as its inherent masculinism. However it is not to Derrida that she turns in this project but rather to Deleuze who, unlike Derrida, does explicitly focus on the body. Underpinning her rethinking of the bodily roots of subjectivity is a tripartite view of the body as the site in which the physical, the symbolic and the sociological overlap. The body is understood in the Deleuzian sense of "a libidinal surface, field of forces, threshold of transcendence" (p.184) The materiality of the body is posed as a "substratum of living matter endowed with memory"(p.165), "pure flows of energy" (p.165) but nevertheless always encoded in language although, importantly, never fully captured in language. That is it always exceeds representation. Thus, although the self is " an entity endowed with identity... anchored in this living matter" (p.165) nevertheless, there simply is no subjectivity outside sexuality and language.

### *The Politics of Ontological Difference*

Braidotti's point is that once we stop equating subjectivity with rational consciousness and recognise its bodily roots, that is once we recognize

that subjects are always embodied, then affectivity and sexuality become salient. For embodied beings in the world are corporeal and as such are both sentient and always already sexed. To be is to be either a man or a woman. Acknowledging her debt to Naomi Schor she argues, "'[B]eing a woman' is always already there as the ontological precondition for my existential becoming as a subject" (Braidotti 1994: 187-8)

So, for Braidotti the starting point of the redefinition of female subjectivity is the fact of being a woman. Sexual difference is a fact. It is ontological. In this sense it is constitutive of our being. However it is not determinative in itself. "Being a woman is not a predication of a prescriptive essence, it is not a causal proposition capable of predetermining the outcome of each individual identity. It rather pertains to the facticity of my being" (1994: 188).

Thus like Grosz, she argues that she is not tying women and men to some sort of essential nature. Any apparent human nature is a cultural artefact. Nevertheless she does argue for some sort of strategic essentialism. In making her case for some form of strategic essentialism or as she puts it "essentialism with a difference" (1994: 186). She argues that this is necessary to provide the common epistemological and ethical grounds for feminism as a political practice. Since, her argument goes the "I" of the speaking subject is always already sexed, subjectivity is always already sexed and it is this that generates a common political and epistemological consensus among women: and yet importantly it does not deny the differences between them. Indeed,



[T]he affirmation of differences *within* joins up with a collective recognition of the differences *between* all of us and the male subjects. The recognition of the sameness of our gender, all other differences taken into account, is a sufficient and necessary condition to make explicit a bond *among* women that is more than the ethics of solidarity and altogether other than the sharing of common interests. Once this common bond is established and the epistemological common grounds of the feminist community are recognized, the basis is set for the elaboration of other values, of different representations of our common difference. (Braidotti 1994: 186)

Thus Braidotti does not find it problematic to continue using the category woman in this way. Indeed she finds it essential. For, in her view, the transformations of the notion of subjectivity required in order to affirm the positivity of sexual difference and female feminist subjects and to develop a place of enunciation for speaking as a woman requires collective political action. As in her nomadic project. She insists that the notion of community is central to the whole project of redefining female subjectivity. She stresses the continuum of women's experiences (following Adrienne Rich). It is this that provides both a basis for a common bond among women and the conditions of possibility in which that redefinition will work. For Braidotti the communal bond comes first and it is the ethical that defines the political. Hence she speaks of an ontological move forward by which a politically enforced collective subject,

the "we women" of the women's movement can empower the subjective becoming of each one of us "I, woman"...It is an act of self-legitimation whereby the she-self blends her ontological

desire to be, with the conscious willful becoming of a collective political movement (Braidotti 1994: 200).

Note moreover, she separates subjectivity (will) and identity (desire). Identity she sees as involving intensive, unconscious processes whereas political subjectivity is a conscious and willful position. Thus her nomadic project is based on a politics of location that involves addressing both these aspects. Political subjectivity is posed in terms of sites of resistance and identity is formulated in terms of a set of identifications. Thus she argues that questions concerning what a self, in fact, *is* become questions of identity. But, at the same time, "The affirmation of my subjectivity need not give a propositional content to my sense of identity: I do not have to define the signifier *woman* in order to assert it as the speaking subject of my discourse" (Braidotti 1994: 186).

### *Change and Transformation*

Politically, Braidotti's point is that exposing the illusion of ontological foundations, substantive notions of the subject, the contingency and transience of identity do not preclude political action or social criticism or, as some would argue, feminism. Nevertheless it does involve a radical revisioning of social change, which, significantly, also involves psychic change. Thus Braidotti wants to establish a symbolic system for women and to escape phallogocentric gender dualism but she does not regard this as simply achievable by volition. (This is similar to the point in Butler and gender as performance performativity that I discuss in chapter 5.) Braidotti argues the need to address all levels that are involved in the constitution of female feminist subjectivity, in particular she specifies the levels of identity, unconscious



identifications and desire. She argues that her nomadic project enables this thus helping to identify the steps en route to the way beyond phallogocentric gender dualism. Thus change requires the construction of new forms of desiring, embodied subjects. This involves addressing both conscious and unconscious desire and the imaginary relations that structure our being. It also involves bringing an intensive approach to the political realm. One that poses desire in the Nietzschean, Deleuzian sense which recognises that voluntary choices are not simply transparent self-evident and rational but multilayered and embodied.

The notion of the nomad enables attention to multiple levels of experience and axes of differentiation in the constitution of subjectivity, e.g. class, race, 'ethnicity' gender, age etc. in the constitution of subjectivity. When adapted to feminist concerns it enables the prioritising of sexual difference.

### **Problems with this account**

So Braidotti rejects debates about causality in favour of a political project of around the facticity of difference. She wants to embrace sexual difference but turn it into a strength rather than a weakness. This involves rejecting the negativity associated with sexual difference and instead affirming its positivity as a means of empowering women in the world. Indeed this concern with women in the world leads her to reject philosophical considerations of 'becoming woman', as in Derrida's work, as inimical to feminist goals since they are not concerned with 'real life' women, as I discussed in chapter 2.

This highlights some of the problems with this approach. Underlying Braidotti's project is a basic view of women as the empirical referents of the signifier 'woman' that is very problematic. To return to my arguments in chapter 2, whilst for Braidotti talk of women and becoming woman and femininity is rejected unless directly related to 'real-life' women in the world, I would argue that the insights gleaned from the use of feminine metaphors in Derridian morphology can be applied to develop an understanding of the construction of 'real life' sexed and gendered beings - women - in all their diversity. Further to this, I would add that although it is developed at the formal level in fact deconstruction is operable and in operation at the empirical level. Indeed this is precisely the kind of binary distinction (formal/empirical) that becomes inadequate in understanding social life and the individuals who comprise it when the insights of deconstruction into meaning and reference, which I discussed in chapters 1 and 2, are embraced. Moreover not only is it the case that there is no presence, no plenitude: that the notion of any direct reference to a phenomenal (never mind noumenal) world becomes problematic and, together with the notion of unmediated experience, tied to the impossible dream of plenitude. It is also the case that deconstruction can help us to access those very mediations through which particular experiences become possible. It can help us to address the whole gamut of experiences that coalesce/overlap/intersect to constitute the process of subjectivity and the production of female and male subjects. It can also help us to engage with the cultural imaginary that provides their implicit and explicit conditions of possibility.

The major problems with Braidotti's project, I would argue, therefore stem from her grounding of feminism in the sexed specificity of the



female body as the basis of the original naming in order to provide the basis for the 'epistemological community of women'. She does not do this through grounding her project in the specificities of women's bodies (i.e. bodily fluids etc.) in the way that Grosz does. Rather, in simply accepting the category woman, albeit as open until we fill it, she leaves unexamined how the category is ascribed: she doesn't tell us how to understand what makes all the bodies female or all the people women, she simply assumes that there is something that does. Indeed Braidotti's acceptance of women as the empirical referents of the category woman involves an acceptance of binary sexual difference and a certain givenness about the relationship between this givenness and the biological body, (albeit mediated and rethought in Deleuzian terms of intensities, capacities and flows). Hence, although the questioning of the content of the category woman is a welcome factor along with the recognition of the mediation of bodily being, ultimately the account is flawed in that sexual difference is simply assumed, despite an avowed intent to rethink the sexed specificity of the body. Raising sexual difference as an issue in thinking corporeality and (the meaning of) the materiality of that corporeality is a vital feminist move, but the project around sexual difference in this account ultimately falls prey to the very binary thinking it is trying to avoid. As in Grosz and Irigaray, the Lacanian framework shapes the project resulting in the reworking of one of the binary pairs rather than undermining the binarization of existence that this framework colludes in. Therefore although Braidotti's project at first sight seems to be going to shed light onto the problematic of rethinking corporeality - she does after all suggest that it amounts to a form of 'female corporeal materialism' - ultimately, in simply assuming the female body, its contribution is limited.

This brings me back then to the question: Is there a way of addressing the project of sexual difference without actually making the kind of assumptions about the body that sexual difference theorists such as Grosz and Braidotti, following Irigaray, rely on?

Judith Butler to whom I turn next does not make such assumptions. Instead, the deconstructive move that Butler makes involves accepting materiality as constructed, in any significant sense, all the way down.

Following Butler, and drawing on Derrida, I argue that if the insights of deconstruction regarding the deconstruction of the material/ideal distinction are applied to the problematic of sex/gender and the body, this provides a way of rethinking the materiality of the body within the problematic of embodied subjectivity. It enables acceptance of feminist insights concerning the salience of gender and acknowledging the specificity of sex/gendered bodies whilst avoiding the essentialism/anti-essentialism, construction/not construction dichotomies.

### **Judith Butler: From Construction to Materialization**

As I pointed out in the last section, Braidotti's project involves a problematic acceptance of women as the empirical referents of the signifier woman, as the basis of feminism. Butler, however, does not share this view of women or Braidotti's view of feminism. Indeed it is precisely the reification of the referents of the category woman that Butler would aim to avoid as inimical to a feminist emancipatory project. Her focus, to reiterate, is rather on the political effects of grounding the category of woman in the materiality of women's bodies and posing the materiality of sex as causal. Moreover although Butler argues against the need to ground feminism in the particularities of



women's bodies, she does not reject any use of the category woman altogether. She accepts the political necessity for feminists to speak as women but she does insist on understanding this category as a site of potential contest, open to alternative configurations. In this way then the category woman is more usefully both put to use and opened up to scrutiny.

### *Materiality*

In *Bodies that Matter* Butler reconsiders the materiality of the body in response to criticisms of the notion of the body that she developed earlier in *Gender Trouble*. In the latter, following Nietzsche and Foucault, she developed a view of the body as a construction, a product of the effects of power; she was then criticised for neglecting what is deemed to be the materiality of the body. In *Bodies that Matter* she addresses that this criticism. She argues that thinking the materiality of the body requires avoiding the sex/gender distinction and rethinking the meaning of construction beyond that implied in the dichotomies of essentialism and or materialism versus construction. She argues that to posit materiality and construction as oppositional serves to conceal the matrix of power that actually produces this particular understanding of construction. Hence she advocates pursuing a critical genealogy of the concept of materiality rather than an acceptance of the irreducibility of the material.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>She argues that materiality is constituted through an exclusion and degradation of the feminine. She does this through a comparison of Aristotle in *De Anima*- for whom "matter is potentiality [dynaneos], form actuality" (Aristotle cited in Butler 1993: 33) - focusing on his distinction between body and soul, and Foucault and then turning to Irigaray who deconstructs the concept of materiality in Plato's form/matter distinction.

Matter is reconceived, "not as a site or surface, but as a *process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter.*" (Butler 1993: 9, original emphasis) The focus here is thus the process of the body's materialization. The 'matter' of bodies becomes an effect of the dynamic of power, "such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects" (Butler 1993: 2). This reconceptualisation of materialization allows Butler to focus on the way the category of sex is not immutable, as in Grosz and Bradiotti, and as it is in Irigaray. It is rather produced as a normative but nevertheless constitutive constraint through which bodies are materialized. Since in this view matter is posed as an effect of power, Butler argues,

We may seek to return to matter as prior to discourse to ground our claims about sexual difference only to discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which that term can be put. (Butler 1993: 29)

Since, for Butler, the category of sex is always reinscribed as gender but nevertheless is "presumed as the irreducible point of departure for the various cultural constructions it has come to bear" (p. 28) she argues that this presumption of the materiality of sex underpins feminist epistemologies, ethics and various analyses of gender. Whereas in a typical deconstructive move Butler says she rather wants to displace the terms of the debate by asking a different question. Thus, "I want to ask how and why 'materiality' has become a sign of irreducibility, that is, how is it that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only *bears* cultural constructions and therefore cannot be a construction?"



(Butler 1993: 28 original emphasis). This questioning helps to render visible the matrix of power that produces the view of materiality in prevailing views of construction as something that stands outside of this process.

### *Political Significance*

Butler's concern is thus with the political significance of the production and regulation of the matter of bodies. She is concerned to deconstruct the notions of the body and materiality in order, "to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power' (Butler 1993:17). So to pose the question in terms of discourse or construction versus materiality, as her critics do, is to miss the critical point. Her critical/political point is that deconstructing the materiality of bodies, "provides the conditions to mobilize the signifier in the service of an alternative production" (17). Hence to deconstruct the category of sex in this way is not to "question the urgency or credibility of sex or violence as political issues, but rather show that the way their very materiality is circumscribed is fully political" (1992: 19). Indeed Butler explains the political significance of this by referring to the legal restrictions on what does and does not count as rape or evidence or the effects of violence etc. She examines the role of the category of sex as a principle of production and regulation rather than merely one of representation. Therefore she advocates putting the categories of sex and violence into quotation marks in order to denaturalize them and indicate that they are sites of political debate.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Butler discusses the use of poststructuralism for considering violence to women's bodies in 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism' (see in particular p.17-19) which forms the introduction to *Feminists Theorise the Political*,

### *Is materiality then a linguistic product?*

Butler however is not arguing for some kind of linguistic monism, any more than Derrida as I have argued in Part 1. Her argument is not that the materiality of bodies is nothing but a linguistic product but rather that the concept of materiality is inescapably bound up with signification. Butler's point on this matter is that , "To posit by way of language a materiality outside of language is still to posit that materiality, and the materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition" (Butler 1993: 30).

### *Problem of Reference*

This view of materiality challenges traditional understandings of the meaning of reference which are simply not complex enough. Indeed traditional understandings of reference and materiality have been generally undermined by poststructuralist insights into meaning and knowing, truth and knowledge. Thus Butler, for example, argues on this point in the context of the body:

To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time further *formation* of that body. In this sense the linguistic capacity to refer to sexed bodies is not denied, but the very meaning of "referentiality" is altered.

---

(Butler 1992) See also Sharon Marcus, 'Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A theory and Politics of Rape' which Butler refers to and which is in the same collection)



In philosophical terms the constative claim is always to some degree performative. (Butler 1993: 10-11)

Hence Butler argues that the claim that she does not take account of the materiality of the body rests on the assumption of a metaphysical opposition between materialism and idealism which is undermined in a poststructuralist understanding of the performativity of discourse as it operates in the materialization of sex. Moreover she insists that she is not defending constructivism per sé but rather interrogating the erasures and exclusions that constitute its limits. What she is doing then, she argues, is questioning materiality as a presupposition. Thus she is not so much disputing the materiality of the body as providing a genealogy of the "normative conditions under which the materiality of the body is framed and formed, and, in particular how it is formed through differential categories of sex" (p.17).

### *Biology*

As more and more research points to the productive rather than descriptive role of biology/science, while at the same time feminists insist on the facticity of sexed/gendered bodies, it becomes clear that conceptualizing construction as something in opposition to essentialism or extraneous to an object is not really adequate.<sup>7</sup> However, one might question whether Butler provides an adequate way of thinking of the materiality of the body. Does her account deal adequately with 'biology', with, as Kirby puts it in another context, "the peristaltic movements of the viscera, the mitosis of cells, the electrical activity that plays across a synapse, the itinerary of a virus, and so on"

---

<sup>7</sup>See for example Oudshoorn (1994) in physics, Armstrong (1987) in medical sociology

(Kirby 1991b :13). Kirby highlights the inadequacy of suggesting that anatomy is simply inseparable from its interpretation. She argues that this involves viewing the body as either a *tabula rasa* or as pre-existing and then entering the field of language, as in psychoanalytic accounts. However, it seems to me, it is not that anatomy is *simply* inseparable from its interpretation. The crucial point is well made by Butler thus:

For surely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these 'facts', one might skeptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as mere construction. Surely there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences. And surely there is. But their irrefutability in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means.

(Butler 1993: xi)

Those very peristaltic juices may well exceed their interpretation. Indeed this point is there in both Nietzsche and Foucault but it is perhaps made most explicitly in Derrida who is at pains to point out that materiality is never fully captured in interpretation. Indeed, that is his critical point.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore Derridian deconstruction and in particular *différance* provide a view of reference and materiality that avoids the separation of text (reference) and extra-textual real (materiality) which can usefully be applied here.

### ***Deconstruction, Reference and Bodies***

Deconstruction renders problematic the concept of materiality but this does not entail an incipient idealism or denial of the material. Indeed

---

<sup>8</sup>Butler's relation to Foucault will be examined in chapter 4.



again the point is that the material is rendered problematic in the sense that the view of meaning and the productivity of language within deconstruction undermines the binary opposition (as indeed all binary oppositions) between the real and the ideal, the material and its representation. This does not involve a denial of the material so much as an insistence on the materiality of representation (or in more technical terms 'the signifier' or signification). The point is that in *différance* the material does not stand in opposition to something ideal but yet there is always a material excess, as I made clear in chapter 1. Representation produces rather than captures the 'real' or the material and there is always an excess to representation. Ultimately what this amounts to, as Derrida explains in *Positions*, is a rejection not so much of matter per sé as a rejection of matter in the logocentric sense as foundational in the sense of presence, reality, or any kind of transcendental signified (Derrida 1981 : 65).<sup>9</sup>

If these insights are applied to the matter of bodies the following implications ensue: If the matter of bodies is seen as itself a matter of production rather than as a predetermining given this paves the way to begin to think about what goes into the production of bodies as male and female subjects; and to focus on the social institutions, practices and knowledges (such as biology) that produce sex and gender as *causes* rather than effects. We can deconstruct the processes, representations and symbolic framework that pervade the cultural imaginary, through which we are constituted and through which we constitute

---

<sup>9</sup> Derrida also discusses the problem of reference and rejects charges that deconstruction involves the suspension of reference, see the interview with Richard Kearney in Kearney (1984), Kirby (1991a, 1991b,) and Ferrell (1991) also discuss the question of reference and materiality in relation to Derrida.

ourselves.<sup>10</sup> For, as Rosalyn Diprose puts it, as the body always refers beyond itself, the production of bodies is also always incomplete. Moreover, precisely because the production of difference is always unfinished and partial "sexed bodies are always open to other possibilities beyond those which position woman as other to man. Even though there is no "outside" the social text, this does not preclude the possibility of change' (Diprose 1994: 80).

But where does social change come from in this case? This is a question I examine in relation to Butler in chapter 5, and to some extent in chapter 4 where it is also considered in relation to Derrida and Foucault. I raise it here to emphasise that it is an integral part of feminists concerns in rethinking corporeality and recognising sexed subjectivity as embodied. Indeed I have demonstrated that their view on this highlights significant differences in the work of the three theorists discussed in this chapter.

## Conclusion

The main concern of this chapter has been to consider the problem of how to rethink the materiality of the body in such a way as to acknowledge both the bodily roots of subjectivity and the sexed specificity of bodies without according women some sort of essential nature. However the rethinking of the materiality of the body has been shown to be somewhat problematic in the work of both Braidotti and Grosz. This is because for them this rethinking involves retaining a

---

<sup>10</sup> (Mis)understanding deconstruction as being about pure textuality or in operation only at the formal level gives rise to the view that deconstruction is not able to be concerned with bodies. For bodies are deemed material entities. This then again feeds into the problem of reference and relatedly of materiality. For a discussion of the apparent neglect of embodiment in deconstruction see Diprose (1994: 77-81).



binary notion of sexual difference around which to build a reconstructive project based on the bodies of women. The problems identified in this regard stem from the fact that their respective projects thus remain caught within a Lacanian framework, even while explicitly attempting to resist it and to follow instead the logic of the way difference works within deconstruction. It is because they remain caught within this Lacanian framework that the only possible response to the effacement of women in sexual difference seems to be to reconstruct that effaced element, which is, after all half of a binary pair.

Following Butler, and drawing on Derrida, I have argued that this is not the only response to the question of sexual difference, nor is it the most fruitful. Indeed, one implication of the argument put forward in this thesis is that such a move would not be successful as it serves to perpetuate the binary thinking on which phallogocentrism is based. I have argued rather that establishing and affirming female subjectivity alongside male subjectivity requires an end to binary thinking on sexual difference, since it is this that sustains gender hierarchies. It involves taking care not to reify a binary notion of sexual difference. Which is why I find Judith Butler's problematic, and the rethinking of the body that it involves, more helpful. I have argued for applying the insights of deconstruction regarding the deconstruction of the material/reference distinction to the problematic of sex/gender and the body. This provides a way of rethinking the materiality of the body within the problematic of embodied subjectivity accepting feminist insights concerning the salience of gender and acknowledging the specificity of sex/gendered bodies. At the same time the binarization of existence and essentialism/anti-essentialism, construction/not construction dichotomies are avoided. It can also accommodate queer

theorists insights concerning the salience of (hetero)sex, as I demonstrate in chapter 5. Butler argues that the focus needs to be on the heterosexualizing imperative of the symbolic order and that "we must begin to think the convergence and reciprocal formation of various imaginaries, and that sexual difference is nether more primary than other forms of social difference, nor is its formation understandable outside of a complex mapping of social power" (Butler 1995 : 142). In which case striving towards establishing an autonomous female sexuality, although perhaps a necessary strategy from a psychoanalytic perspective, is not necessarily helpful. Moreover Butler's notion of the abject, which is only touched on in this chapter is important for moving beyond the Lacanian notion of symbolic and imaginary that is foundational to much feminist theorizing about sexual difference and subjectivity, as chapter 4 demonstrates.



## Chapter 4

### Derrida and Foucault: Writing and Discourse

Michel Foucault did not have much to say on the topic of sexual difference. Nevertheless his work on sex, sexuality and the body, has proved very useful, in various ways to both feminist and 'queer' projects. Indeed his genealogical method and concepts of discourse and power provide the starting point for Butler's reformulation of corporeality that I discuss in chapter 3 and her notion of performativity that I discuss in chapter 5.<sup>1</sup> Further to this, and despite their early public disagreements, Foucault's work shares a number of similarities with Derrida's.<sup>2</sup> For example they share a similar theoretical orientation at the heart of which is a concern with, and critique of, representation. Foucault also views language as something other than a mere tool of expression and as in some way constitutive of reality and the individuals who comprise it. He, like Derrida, seems to find it difficult to define his projects and is reluctant to characterise them. Foucault, for example, never accepted the label poststructuralist or postmodern though that is how his work is often characterised by others.<sup>3</sup> Indeed he, like Derrida, was reluctant to adopt any labels. They have both been influenced by Nietzsche and Foucault's work, like

---

<sup>1</sup>Foucault's work is often divided into three periods by commentators and by Foucault himself; archaeology; genealogy and ethics. My focus here is on his genealogical period since this involved an explicit focus on the body; and it is this focus that has been particularly productive for feminist projects.

<sup>2</sup>For details of the Derrida Foucault 'debate' in the 1960s and early 1970s see for example Boyne (1990), Braidotti (1991), Derrida (1996) for his own postscript, Howells (1999),

<sup>3</sup>Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982) describe Foucault's work as moving 'beyond structuralism and hermeneutics'.

Derrida's, involves a critique of metaphysical dualism's and of the concepts of causality, identity, the humanist subject, and absolute truth. In his work, as in Derrida's neither the social nor the natural world, possess any kind of fixed essential meaning that language is used as a tool to express (though logocentrism functions as if it does). And, Foucault, like Derrida is concerned with change and transformation, wanting to develop the positive rather than negative implications of these insights. He advocates strategies of permanent critique for similar reasons to Derrida and he too is accused of relativism, nihilism and political inadequacy (misguidedly as I argue).

Nevertheless, as far as feminist projects go, Foucault's work is often taken to be more relevant than Derrida's and tends to meet with less hostility. This work is of undoubted value in bringing the kind of insights that Derrida makes to bear in the understanding of the body, and in giving it a focus of attention that is absent in Derrida's own work. However, it is my contention that his work is nevertheless fraught with obstacles around the question of resistance and change in a way that Derrida's is not. In this chapter I want to examine the relative merits of Foucault's notion of 'discourse' and Derrida's notion of 'writing' and their divergent (as well as similar) theoretical antecedents, in order to demonstrate this.

As I have shown, Derrida's focus is on language and 'writing' and demonstrating the instability of meaning: that it is part of a context dependent process of infinite referral, an inescapable (structural) process of interpretation. To recap briefly, meaning is therefore multiple and open to challenge and change. It is not something whose truth can be fixed once and for all and we cannot have direct



unmediated knowledge of the world or even ourselves. The correlate of this is that knowledge, truth, subjectivity and/or consciousness become accessible only through significatory frameworks and as such become cultural products. They are not natural (since the natural is also a systemic production) self-evident or self-identical. In this view, language plays a constitutive rather than simply expressive role in the creation of both meaning and human subjectivity; and in how we understand both our world, and the social relations on which it is predicated, and ourselves as subjects. This involves a critique of the Cartesian founding subject then as a conscious entity who can stand outside culture and nature and observe the world (and 'his' body) neutrally and discover the/its truth. Moreover, for Derrida the fixing of meaning is an effect of representation. It is both temporary and retrospective. Applied to the body it thus follows that biology does not fix the meaning of the body, although logocentric representations may act as if this were the case.

Simplifying matters somewhat, it could be said that Foucault provides a way of understanding how language operates in these ways in his theory of discourse and his radical reconceptualisation of power and knowledge<sup>4</sup>. However, it seems to me that this view stems from the fact that Derrida's interest in language and the production of meaning takes for its main focus the ways that this works in philosophical texts. Although concerned with the implications of his work for subjectivity, and increasingly ethics and politics,<sup>5</sup> his focus continues to be on philosophical texts, rather than social practices, unlike Foucault.

---

<sup>4</sup>Chris Weedon (1987,1997) suggests this

<sup>5</sup>See for example *The Politics of Friendship* (1997), first published in French as *Politiques de l'amitié* Paris: Galilee 1994; Interview 'On Responsibility' May 1993 reproduced in Dronsfield and Midgley (1997) *Adieu to Levinas* (1999)

Foucault's work is more explicitly oriented to a critique of knowledge and power and he takes as his focus the production of knowledge in the human sciences and the implications of this for social practices. He wants to demonstrate the complicity of the human sciences in power relations and the subjection/subjectification of subjects and thereby challenge the view that these disciplines are progressively producing emancipatory knowledge or truths for the good of mankind (sic). His work therefore has a more obvious practical applicability.

Further to this, although Foucault's work is also considered difficult to access, Derrida's work, especially his early works often involve a playful textual speculation that belies the seriousness of his projects, as I discuss in chapter 1. This can be a stumbling block to an appreciation of the seriousness of Derrida's projects and results in the charge that they lack philosophical rigour, never mind practical applicability.<sup>6</sup> However, to recap my earlier discussion, the playfulness in question comes from a concern to demonstrate the play of meaning and language in these texts and the significance of this for the role of meanings and language in the constitution of reality, and the individuals (as both subjects and objects) who comprise it. The perceived lack of (philosophical or practical) relevance of this emphasis on 'textuality' stems from an association of it with words and/or language that are somehow divorced from reality, the material world, and matter such that they become relegated solely to the realm of the

---

<sup>6</sup>See for example Habermas (1989), Rorty (1989), among many others. Though it is also interesting to note that Habermas has been widely criticised for not reading the works he criticises in their entirety and for relying on secondary sources rather than Derrida's own texts.



playful. If these points are missed the crucial point of Derrida's work is lost.

The crucial point to grasp is that in Derrida's formulation of textuality, textuality *is* the material world, reality, matter, as I have been at pains to demonstrate in chapter 1. 'Writing', it is to be remembered, is extended from its restricted (logocentric, phonocentric) sense of marks on a page, to a general sense in which all of social reality is comprised of texts because there simply is no meaning outside of interpretation; and as such it is open to deconstruction. (This even applies to our most intimate experiences of our own bodies and identities, as I demonstrate in chapter 2, in relation to Spivak and practices of female genital mutilation). This is the crucial point in all of Derrida's work, and it is on acceptance of this 'fact' that his arguments stand or fall, and a deconstructive approach is appreciated or not.<sup>7</sup> This is not to deny however that Derrida's own work does in fact focus in the main on philosophical texts; it is rather to emphasise the significance of this work when its insights are applied to the problematic of corporeality, subjectivity and sexual difference. Indeed, more than this, it is to argue that it is Derrida's notion of writing that gives his work the edge over Foucault's. For, not only does this involve the critical engagement with the ontology of sexual difference that I have argued can be so useful to feminist theory, (in chapters 2 and 3) it is precisely because of this view of language and writing that Derrida is able to avoid the

---

<sup>7</sup>See Ann Game (1992) for an interesting example of someone who does take this insight seriously and demonstrates the practical value of it in the empirical context of sociological inquiry. You can't get much more practical or empirical than sociological inquiry. Like a number of others in the late 1980s and early 1990s Game is especially concerned with the role of desire in the production of sociological 'facts' and the ways in which this and the body have been neglected in this discipline. Where her work has the edge, it seems to me, is that she fully appreciates the utility of a deconstructive approach for empirical inquiry.

ultimate determinism that, despite his best intentions, haunts Foucault's genealogy and notion of discourse.

Moreover, Derrida comes to this view of language and writing because his work and his (non)concepts both engage with and are informed by structural linguistics and psychoanalysis (amongst other things) in a way that Foucault's is not. Indeed, Foucault views psychoanalysis as part of the very disciplinary framework that sustains the repressive hypothesis that his genealogical inquiries aim to debunk.

Having thus set the context for this debate, I will begin the discussion by setting out the main elements of Foucault's view of discourse as applied to the body, followed by a brief assessment of the benefits of this for feminist projects. I will then go on to further develop Derrida's view of writing in the context of his critique of Austin's speech act theory and his (Derrida's) generalisation of the performative effects of language, which referred to in chapter 1 but did not discuss in detail. Finally, I will set these insights in the contexts of Butler's critique of the heterosexualising imperative in the Lacanian symbolic framework in order to demonstrate the positive implications for feminist body/gender theory.

### **Foucault: Discourse, Genealogy, Power**

In order to appreciate the insights and implications of Foucault's notion of discourse, we need to begin with his radical reconceptualisation of power that accompanied his shift from archaeological to genealogical inquiry in what might be described as his Nietzschean turn in the 1970s. I will consider this in some detail as it is



difficulties concerning the workings of power that render his notion of the discursive production of bodies and subjects so problematic as well as so fruitful. It is argued that it is these that ultimately undermine the possibilities for resistance, despite, to reiterate, Foucault's own best intentions.

Foucault's radical reconceptualisation of power has had profound implications for our most basic assumptions including our view of identity, sexuality, knowledge, truth, political action and ourselves. It involves a rejection of the prevailing negative juridico-political model in which power operates principally through repression and on which both liberalism and Marxism are based, as well as much contemporary feminism.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the state, the law and the overall unity of domination are not given at the outset, Foucault argues in the *History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, but are rather 'only the terminal forms power takes' (p.29). Power, he argues, does not emanate from a central point, or from the top down, whether from a state, sovereign or whatever; it cannot be seized. He proposed an alternative view of power as positive, creative, strategic and technical, as well as relational and always implying resistance; and in which power and knowledge are interdependent.

This view involves an increased focus on the body as the site of the exercise of power, the nodal point of discourses of power/knowledge. The repressive hypothesis in which sexuality is seen as something which is innate but repressed is rejected. Sexuality, far from being the innate repressed product of biology, or Freudian drives, becomes an historical and cultural product. It becomes a primary locus of power

---

<sup>8</sup>See also my discussion of Ebert in chapter 5

and social control in contemporary society, constituting subjects by exercising control on and through their bodies.

Power relations then, are like spiralling networks that spread throughout society. They are not external to, but immanent within, other relations of all kinds, whether they are economic, sexual, knowledge-related or whatever. Hence, (and this is a point particularly pertinent for feminist analyses of male power) there is no monocausal root of power and any analysis needs to focus on specific domains in which power is exercised, in historical situations. So, rather than seeking to locate the source of power, the focus should be on its role in the production of reality, truth and human subjects and the practices that constitute these. What is needed therefore, in this view, is not a metacritique of power but a 'microphysics' of power, to focus on the specific mechanisms through which it operates in the capillaries; the concrete detail, techniques, tactics and strategies of power - all of which are neglected in the juridico-political model.

Significantly then, Foucault's concern is not with the 'what' of power, the grand explanation, but with the 'how' of power, how it operates. His interest stems not from an interest in power per se but from his attempt, as he puts it in 'The Subject and Power', "to create a history of the different modes by which in our culture human beings are made subjects" (Foucault 1982: 208). Hence he does not ask what power is but rather how is it exercised.

What he proposes therefore, is not really a theory of power, but rather a 'microphysics of power', 'an analytic of power relations' in order to provide a grid of analysis to make possible the analysis of the



"multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation" (Foucault 1978: 92). He wants to analyse the specific domains formed by power and in particular to focus on the specificity of its material bodily forms.

His focus on the body as the intersection of power/knowledge and discourse, in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (his genealogies) reveals what he terms 'bio-power' to be the pervasive organising principle in the modern age in Western society. In contrast to the overtly violent monarchical power of the classical age, bio-power is an apparently benevolent but nevertheless more effective insidious form of social control aimed at the production of useful but also 'docile' individuals. Indeed his central thesis in these two works is that power relations are constitutive of the social realm and that they work on and through the bodies of individuals. He is concerned to examine the construction of particular types of subjects and subjectivity through the operations of particular regimes of power/knowledge that work in disciplinary fashion on and through the body. The focus of analysis is the discursive field - penology in *Discipline and Punish* and sexuality in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1. Discursive fields can be thought of as competing frameworks in the production of meaning and the organisation of social reality and the institutions, practices, and processes that comprise it. These set the conditions of possibility for whatever can be said, or thought, or done in any particular context, at any particular time. Importantly however, bio-power in its two modalities - the social body and the control of populations, and sexuality - regulates and controls, not through repression but through the incitement of desires, self-surveillance and confession. It is through these that individuals come

to know themselves and the truth of their sexuality, police themselves and measure themselves against a standard normalcy.

The implication however, is not that power never operates as a repressive force but rather that to equate power only with repression is inadequate. It cannot capture the complexity of contemporary power relations and their role in the constitution of individuals as subjects. A particularly significant defining feature of Foucault's conception of power relations outlined in the *History of Sexuality* Volume 1 is that they are "both intentional and non-subjective" (p.94), "strategies without strategists, which condition the battle in each micro-context" (p.94). (War is a frequent metaphor for power here, emphasising the role of struggle and force involved in the exercise of power relations). Moreover, Foucault argues, "There is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives" (p.95)

Significantly, he continues:

But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decisions of an individual subject; let us not look for the headquarters that presides over its rationality, neither the caste which governs, nor those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in society...The logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable and yet it is often the case there is no-one there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them. (Foucault 1978: 95)

Therefore, importantly for feminism, and against those who would deny it, Foucault's view of power does involve *patterns* and *tendencies* of historical movement.



An analytics of power then reveals that power is everywhere, and as such, serves not only as a critique of the juridico-political model of power that Foucault rejects, but also serves to refute any notions of liberation – whether they are political or sexual - that promise a realm free of the hold of power. However, although his critics<sup>9</sup> argue that in so posing power everywhere he also poses it as nowhere and thus precludes effective opposition; Foucault himself poses the very different view that, being everywhere it must be opposed everywhere. Moreover, as he points out in the *History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, where there is power there is also *necessarily* resistance. To say that power is inescapable, he argues, is to misunderstand the relational character of power relationships. "Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance ... The points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network (Foucault 1978: 95). The crucial point, however, is that "there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary" (Foucault 1978: 95) Moreover although there are occasional 'radical ruptures':

[M]ore often we are dealing with mobile transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remoulding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and in their minds. (Foucault 1978: 96)

Hence, state power is not the starting point of the analysis for Foucault, nor is it the strategic point of resistance, because, as he argues it is dependent on the knowledge claims of the human sciences which

---

<sup>9</sup>See for example Merquior (1985), Dews (1987), Hartsock (1990).

coordinate power relations into patterns of domination which work through the establishment of dominant discourses and disciplinary power. It is dependent on the micro-mechanisms of power which are consolidated and co-ordinated by the institutions, practices and knowledge claims of the disciplines which are essential to it. The way to resistance therefore is rather through the micro-mechanisms that make up the web of power relations: discourses and discursive practices.

Similarly, if the ubiquity of male dominance, or the dominance of the male which is not quite the same thing, is dependent on the multiplicity of power relations, manifested in discursive practices, on a multiplicity of sites and if those power relations are inherently unstable and themselves imply resistance, what feminists require are the tools to analyse and unmask these mechanisms of male power inherent in those relations of force; and thereby reveal the workings of power in operation in otherwise undreamed of arenas. (Indeed one of the secrets of power's success, Foucault argues, is that it masks its own operation.) This will help reveal possibilities for resistance. In other words what is required is genealogy; the methodological counterpart to Foucault's radical reconceptualisation of power.

### *Discourse*

However, before moving on to a discussion of Foucault's genealogy, I would first like to say something about his notion of discourse. Power and knowledge then, are intrinsically related and are expressed in discourses. The production of knowledge is not a matter of discovering the truth about reality since there is no truth about reality outside of



our discourses that is waiting to be discovered. Truth and falsity do not depend on any absolute standard but on acceptance of the facts entailed in the discourses on which particular truths are based. Foucault tries to avoid the discursive/non-discursive dichotomy in his insistence that discourses are characterised by the creation of both power/knowledge (regimes of truth) and subjects and objects, and that all knowledge is discursive practice. These practices are both productive of networks of power and knowledge and at the same time, produced within such networks.

Discourses, then in Foucault's work, are clearly more than simply the spoken or written word, or language in the sense of communication. They provide the conditions of possibility for whatever can be said or thought or done. They produce 'facts' or 'truths' and they have a normative function in that they set the parameters of normalcy and define what does or does not constitute truth. In a sense then discourses provide the framework, the logic that underpins particular institutions, practices and subjectivities. Foucault turns to genealogy as a means of looking for the play of power in all discourses; a means of analysing how individuals are both (discursively) constituted and (discursively) constitute themselves as human subjects

### *Genealogy*

Genealogy is both a method of investigation, involving historical analysis and critique, and a tool of resistance. Through this Foucault aims to highlight the anonymous historical processes through which our identities and sense of self are constructed. Genealogy highlights the role of the body within this as a target for the controlling and

simultaneously productive forces by means of which these processes work; through which they are experienced individually. It is an attempt to bring to awareness the forces that constitute us and define the range of possibilities for us in particular contexts. Though note not in the sense of the self-consciousness equated with the Cartesian subject. It is rather a means of highlighting and examining historically changeable practices and understandings in order to free us from them.<sup>10</sup> The aim, nevertheless, is to foster resistance.

Foucault's genealogy takes as its starting point Nietzsche's crucial insight that "things have no essence or that their essence is fabricated piecemeal from alien forms". Genealogy rests on the assumption that there are no laws, fixed essences or metaphysical finality. There is no fixed reality available to us, everything is historical and contextual. Any sense of fixed identity is exposed as an illusion, for "Nothing in man (sic) not even his body - is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (Foucault 1977d: 153).

Focusing on the body as the nodal point through which power/knowledge operates in its discursive production, Foucault as a genealogist traces the elements of a 'political technology' of sex and traces them back in time in order to produce what he refers to in *Discipline and Punish* as a 'history of the present' (p.10). Note however, that he eschews all notions of progressive or teleological history and orthodox historiography. He does not aim to project contemporary meanings backwards, he rather seeks the conditions of

---

<sup>10</sup>See David Hoy (1986)



possibility - *a priori*, exclusions and repressions - that serve to produce those current meanings.

Hence the genealogist is, as Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982) suggest, a diagnostician who focuses on the relations of power/knowledge and the body in contemporary society and reveals the fundamental contingency, discontinuity, and ignoble origins of traditional teleological history, knowledge and the human subject. The 'Man' of Western humanism is thus revealed to be a conceptual abstraction with no basis in fact and the human sciences are undermined. Truth and knowledge are inextricably bound up with power. As Foucault argues in 'Truth and Power', "A 'regime of truth' is not established by an ever closer approximation to the truth since "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (Foucault 1984: 74). Hence "The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology. It is truth itself. Hence the importance of Nietzsche" (Foucault, 1984: 75).

Foucault explicitly rejects the concept of ideology because of its implication in the idea that there could be a realm free of ideology and power, pure non-ideological understandings of social relations etc. For Foucault this is simply not possible. (Neither is it possible for Derrida if we take ideology to be synonymous with error and its removal a matter of freedom and liberation to some pure realm of presence.)

The human sciences are not simply describing the world and the subjects in it but are rather normalising, normative and exclusionary - excluding as deviants those who do not conform. The power relations

that are intrinsic to them involve the subjugation of alternative, local and fragmented knowledges. These are part of the resistance and struggle that characterises all knowledge production. Genealogies involve 'a painstaking rediscovery' of those struggles, the 'rude memory' of their conflicts and a critique of the essentialism of totalising theories. As Foucault puts it, genealogy

should be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledge from subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition, and struggle against the coercion of unitary formal and scientific discourses. It is based on a reactivation of local knowledges - of minor knowledges as Deleuze might call them - in opposition to the scientific hierarchisation of knowledge and the effects intrinsic to their power. (Foucault, 1980: 85)

Foucauldian genealogy then involves uncovering the constitutive effects of power with the aim of creating the space in which to resist it and thus aiding the expression of those whose knowledge and experiences are suppressed in the dominant disciplinary discourses.

### *Disciplinary Power and the Body*

Disciplinary power takes the form of knowledge produced in the human sciences and the emergence of disciplinary techniques and practices such as those in medicine, psychiatry, criminology and institutions such as hospitals and asylums which define who is sick or deviant or mad. Thus in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 Foucault outlines how medical, psychiatric, welfare and legal discourses combine to construct homosexuality as a defining characteristic of certain types of person. In the 19th century there had been a search for the scientific truth of about sexuality and although the sexual



behaviour was not new a new category of sexuality (and identity was created) The homosexual personality as sick and perverted was thus a construct of the emerging discourses. Homosexuals were identified, categorised, labelled and excluded from normal social interaction.

Thus sexuality is proposed as a 'technology of sex' not a property of bodies or something that exists in human beings. It is the product of a complex political technology. This means that it is the product of various institutionalised discourses, knowledges, and the practices that pervade our everyday lives. Human sciences, such as medicine and psychoanalysis, play a powerful normalising role in the contemporary constitution of bodies.

For Foucault then the body is a cultural and historical construct. Even in its materiality or corporeality it is inseparable from the power relations that constitute it. There is no pre-discursive body. In 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' the body is described as

[T]he inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity) and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy as an analysis of descent is thus situated within the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the processes of history's destruction of the body. (Foucault 1977d: 148)

It is worth noting however, that although Foucault posits the body as the 'inscribed surface of events' he would, nevertheless, refuse the duality of corporeal exteriority and psychological interiority. It is precisely such distinctions that his account is attempting to avoid, along with other binary oppositions such as science/ideology;

discursive/non-discursive that I mentioned earlier. His work like Derrida's involves the displacement of such dualisms.

### **Feminism and Foucault**

Now, in considering the limitations of this account, let me turn more specifically to the implications involved for feminism. This has been discussed in a number of places and I will merely summarise the issues here.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most pressing concerns in contemporary feminist body theory, as I have discussed in chapter 3, is to find a way of rethinking the materiality of the body in its corporeal and sexed specificity, without simultaneously tying women to their biology. Despite his own lack of attention to sexual difference, Foucault's account clearly provides a means of thinking the body without recourse to biological foundations and so it would seem to present a useful contribution to this endeavour. Further to this Foucault's genealogical method provides tools of historical analysis and critique that, adapted to feminist concerns, have proved very useful for feminists. His work has paved the way for feminists to demonstrate the crucial role of the construction of gender-based inequalities, rooted in biological attributes, in the legitimation and perpetuation of hierarchies that are social, rather than natural in origin.

Indeed, many feminists have recognised the potential of a feminist appropriation of Foucault and have produced what Jana Sawicki refers

---

<sup>11</sup>See for example McNay (1992), Ramazanoglu (1993) Sheldrick (1997) and early accounts such as Diamond and Quimby (eds) (1988), Bartky (1988).



to, in *Disciplining Foucault*, as "path breaking and provocative social and cultural criticism" (1991: 95). For example despite his own androcentrism and associated 'gender blindness' a number of feminists have analysed gender as the product of various discourses and political technologies of the body. Their analyses of anorexia nervosa, the social construction of femininity and masculinity, sexuality and the politics of sexual difference, the politics of needs have been produced in this way, and as such, have made a major contribution to feminist gender theory.

Sawicki (1991) suggests that such appropriations have taken two main forms. One involves highlighting forms of domination by employing Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power in order to isolate the disciplinary mechanisms involved in the production of women's bodies (and men's). The other entails a focus on the possibilities for resistance, presented in such analyses, which identify sites of resistance and struggle. The argument is that although Foucault himself focuses on dominant discourses and disciplinary technologies of the body (and soul) in his characterisation of bio-power in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, it is nevertheless possible to adapt his form of genealogical critique to feminist concerns, and focus instead on sites of resistance and struggle. Indeed Sawicki (1991) goes so far as to argue that work done in these two areas has not only had profound implications for contemporary feminism but that an appropriation of Foucault's genealogy is *essential* to feminism<sup>12</sup>.

Indeed one of the strengths of his work, for those who seek to appropriate it, clearly lies in the possibilities it presents for resistance to

---

<sup>12</sup>She rethinks this view later, see Sawicki (1994)

domination. In keeping with these sentiments it is argued that Foucault sought to establish two principle theses.<sup>13</sup> These are that we can discuss resistance to oppression without recourse to metacritiques of power; and that we can discuss subjects and action without reference to a Cartesian constituting subject. These are indeed significant moves for feminist theory and they are in keeping with the deconstructive insights I have been discussing in this thesis. However it is precisely around this question of resistance that the major shortcomings of Foucault's work centre, although not all of the criticisms that are made of his work in this regard have equal validity.

One set of criticisms that I would want to reject, centre around similar criticisms that I have discussed in relation to Derrida: accusations that his theoretical approach entails relativism, nihilism and political inadequacy because it undermines both the grounds for political action, or critique, and the constituting humanist subject who would undertake it. Another similar set of criticisms to this, which are again rather like criticisms made of deconstructive insights, centre on the (supposedly) negative concept of freedom and liberation that his work entails and which is deemed to undermine feminism as an emancipatory project. Here the problem centres on the concepts of freedom and liberation themselves and associated ideas about what an emancipatory project would, could or should involve. Again I am persuaded more by the counter-argument that it is not freedom and liberation themselves that Foucault rejects. It is rather the particular construction of those concepts in liberalism humanism and Marxism, and their feminist variants, including certain forms of radical feminism which seek to celebrate women's essential natures. As

---

<sup>13</sup>See Susan Hekman (1990).



Foucault's genealogies show such constructions of freedom and liberation have more to do with techniques of domination. Where they err, in particular, is in assuming that there is some essential self or reality to which one could be 'liberated'. As I have shown, Foucault's Nietzschean influence shows here. Indeed Foucault's debt to Nietzsche is explicit and acknowledged. His concrete genealogies accept Nietzsche's insight that under interpretation is only more interpretation. Accordingly there is no realm free of power; no underlying reality, essential self or pre-discursive body. As one sympathetic commentator observes, freedom for Foucault is not to be found in either self-discovery, authenticity or (alluding rather negatively to Derrida) the 'free play of language', but rather in a "constant attempt at self-disengagement and self invention" (Rajchman 1985: 38). Therefore, for Foucault, "Freedom does not basically lie in discovering, or being able to determine who we are, but in rebelling against those ways in which we are already defined, categorized and classified" (Rajchman 1985: 38). (Which recalls my argument against nominalism in chapter 2). And this is Butler's move, as I discuss in chapter 5, although she finds she needs to move outside a Foucauldian framework to draw on Derrida and his critique of speech act theory to make it.

The trouble is that although genealogy might seem to offer feminist appropriate tools of historical analysis there are in Foucault's work a number of theoretical *non sequiturs*: in particular the failure to reconcile theoretically the production of docile bodies with the possibility of resistance. Foucault himself was aware of these difficulties. Indeed perhaps because of them, he switched his attention from the body/subject to the problematic of the self in his later works,

where he attempted to formulate an 'aesthetics of existence' leaving various problems in this area unanswered.<sup>14</sup>

The problem with resistance in his depiction of the body, the subject and social reality as a product a discursive effect and product of power relations is this: although Foucault might insist that there is no power without resistance and struggle and he talks about reverse discourses and subjugated knowledges, a significant flaw in this account is that in posing the body as the chief target of power relations he seems to portray an 'undifferentiated and uni-directional' account of power in which it seems to appear as "a monolithic force with an inexorable and monolithic grip on its subjects" (McNay 1992: 38).

One response to this is to suggest that what his account lacks is a concept of the libidinal body, to act as a counter-factual to power. This is the suggestion that Peter Dews (1987) makes. (It is also the direction that Deleuze and Guattari move in, on whose work Braidotti, discussed in chapter 3, draws.) However this is not the only solution. Another is to rethink the workings of power in the production of the body, and the constitution of subjectivity, through a development of the notion of performativity. This is Butler's move. It is precisely for these reasons that she adds Derrida's reworking of Austin to her otherwise very Foucauldian analyses. However, as I discuss Butler's moves in detail in chapter five I won't pre-empt that discussion here. Suffice it for now to say that it is because Butler wants to allow for resistance and change in her account of gendered embodiment - and in so doing avoid what she terms 'Foucault's paradox' - that she draws on and develops a number of Derridian insights concerning the nature of the

---

<sup>14</sup>See McNay (1992), (1994), Foucault (1985), (1986)



performative, in particular iterability, temporality and citationality. Butler applies them in her 'queer theory': that is she employs them in her theorisation of the body and the production or inauguration of embodied subjectivity. It is in order to accommodate the intransigent, resilient aspects of identity that she develops these insights further in her most recent works concerning 'the psychic life of power' and relatedly the workings of 'hate speech', which I also discuss in chapter 5.<sup>15</sup>

For now however, having laid out the main elements of Foucault's notion of discourse and the discursive construction of the body, and having discussed the implications and limitations of this for feminist projects, I will return to Derrida and his notion of writing in order to show why I think this has the edge over Foucault in allowing the possibility of resistance. With this aim in mind I will develop Derrida's notion of writing in the context of his critique of Austin's speech act theory and generalisation of the performative effects of language.

### **Derrida's Critique of Speech Act Theory and Generalisation of the Performative Effects of Language**

One of the major differences between Foucault's view of discourse and Derrida's view of 'writing' is the formers engagement with, and adaptation of, key concepts of Freud's work. Indeed it seems to me that this is what gives Derrida's work the critical edge over Foucault's. In contrast to Derrida, Foucault dismisses psychoanalysis as part of the disciplinary framework of modern societies and discusses Freud, when

---

<sup>15</sup>See Butler (1997a) and (1997b)

he does mention him, in fairly negative terms in.<sup>16</sup> Although Foucault does afford significant insight into the notions of repression and liberation, his analysis is thus denied the insights to be gleaned from an appropriation of other aspects of Freud's work.

Derrida is not interested in psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice, any more than Foucault is. He is however interested in the philosophical implications of Freud's work. Moreover this engagement is hardly surprising, as it was Freud who first raised the possibility of the impossibility, so to speak, of presence for consciousness or the ego. The aspects of Freud's work that Derrida develops that I want to highlight here are his use of writing as a metaphor for the workings and content of the psyche, his use of the metaphor of the mystic writing pad for the unconscious, and repression. These have implications, in particular, for the fixing (or not) of meaning and the disruption of conscious intentions and they undermine the possibility of a self-present subject. They have all contributed significantly, and explicitly, to Derrida's own notion of writing and his critique of the speech/writing opposition and the metaphysics of presence, as well as the subsequent development of *différance*. The first two, though not so much the notion of repression, have contributed to the development of Derrida's notion of iteration.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Derrida himself also suggests that Foucault's work is limited by a lack of serious engagement with Freud's work, especially *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and a complete neglect of Lacan, in a recent essay on Foucault collected in *Resistances and Psychoanalysis*. He suggests that Freud's view of the duality of the death drive and the Pleasure Principle could have been related to Foucault's own power/pleasure duality. This essay was first given as a paper at a conference to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the original French version of *Madness and Civilisation* (*Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*) in 1961, and in it he traces Freud's brief encounters with Freud in the course of his oeuvre. (See Howells 1999).

<sup>17</sup>See, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' in *Writing and Difference* (Derrida 1978a), 'Différance' in *Margins of Philosophy* (Derrida 1982). Derrida also discusses Freud (and Lacan), in a number of other places, including, in particular, in *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Back*, (Derrida 1987), 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other', (Derrida 1989), and *Derridabase* (Derrida and Bennington 1993), *Resistance and Psychoanalysis*.



These all involve important insights which he brings to bear in the critique of Austin's speech act theory in 'Signature, Event, Context' (SEC) (Derrida 1982).

Derrida's notion of writing as a structure that is always already inhabited by the trace, which I discussed in chapter 1, is indebted to Freud<sup>18</sup>. In 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', in *Writing and Difference*, he presents a linguistic interpretation of Freud's work focusing on his use of the metaphor of writing for understanding the workings of the psyche. The Freudian notion of the unconscious as an absent presence, an alterity which cannot be known but which provides the conditions of possibility for what is known, is of particular significance for Derrida in deconstructing the presence/ absence opposition and the speech writing opposition (both of which are discussed in chapter 1). However where Freud takes the unconscious to be constituted by ideational representations of instincts or drives, for Derrida it is more like an empty space. Indeed he emphasises that it is not "a hidden, virtual or potential self-presence" (Derrida 1982: 20). It is rather that which provides the possibility for interpretation, for experience, meaning and subjectivity even as it simultaneously marks the impossibility of full presence in any of these arenas; all of which are constituted within a never ending or abyssal process of referral and deferral, differing and differentiation, as I have shown in chapter 1.

To sum up then, Derrida's concern is with a kind of structural unconscious that is originary without either being finite or implying

---

(Derrida (1998). Other works make use of psychoanalytic notions e.g. *Glas* (Derrida 1986b) and/or take issue with the issue of castration e.g. *Spurs* (Derrida 1979).

<sup>18</sup> Though note that this is not a one-way process. Indeed Howells (1999) argues that it is deconstruction that helps illuminate Freud's notion of the trace and the unconscious, rather than the other way around, as well as the psychoanalytic notion of castration.

closure and the ways in which this subverts the possibility of conscious intention. Many of the concepts he develops throughout his (still ongoing) work involve shedding further light on the ways that this might (be at) work and thus further develop his critique of presence (e.g. *différance*, trace, archi-writing, iterability, citation, spacing, dissemination, death, the gift). That this structural unconscious does not imply closure is perhaps the most significant aspect that I want to highlight here, as it is this that provides the possibility for change and transformation implied in his notion of iteration, as I will show; and for a positive appreciation of his critique of Austin's notion of performative speech acts.

In a now classic paper, reproduced in several places<sup>19</sup> Derrida deconstructed the speech act theory of J. L. Austin and provoked the debate - if that is not too strong a term - in *Glyph*, with John Searle. However I won't go into the details of the Derrida/Searle debate here since my concern is not so much with the critique of Austin per sé and Searle's defence of his work. It is rather with Derrida's own insistence that all language is performative and on the possibility of failure as a constitutive element in that (rather than a contingent aspect as Austin would have it).<sup>20</sup> My aim is to demonstrate the significance of this for thinking about the body and gender as performative effects; and to argue that this understanding of performativity can usefully be applied to the problematic of the body and gender and identity and help us to understand the role of language in the production of these categories. .

---

<sup>19</sup>It was first published in French in *Marges de la Philosophie* in 1972 and in English in *Glyph* in 1977.

<sup>20</sup>For details of the disagreement between Derrida and Searle see *Limited Inc.* (Derrida 1988) and Spivak (1980).



To reiterate, Derrida brings the insights of *Of Grammatology* concerning the nature of language and his view of speech as 'writing' to bear on Austin's (1962) notion of speech act theory in *How to Do things with Word* and, importantly, further develops the notion of iterability. In so doing he highlights the metaphysical presuppositions that are involved in Austin's notion of a performative speech act. (This was of particular significance given the roots of Austin's speech act theory in Oxford ordinary language philosophy which expressly aimed to avoid any such metaphysical presumptions.) Derrida demonstrates that Austin succumbs to the logocentric assumption that meaning is fixed by the intentions of the speaker (and thus discerns the metaphysics of presence at work in his theory). Further to this, he highlights and brings into question Austin view of language as only a matter of communication (interestingly Derrida refers to language here as 'acts of discourse' (Derrida 1982: 321). This is in opposition to performative speech acts, which bring into being that which they name and are therefore productive. Hence his distinction between constative speech which is descriptive only, and as such a question of truth and falsity, and performative speech which is productive e.g. marrying, naming a ship. He also makes a further distinction in the latter between illocutionary speech acts and perlocutionary speech acts (though as I do not think this distinction is particularly relevant to my discussion I will not belabour this point here).

The point is that to make this distinction Austin sets up a series of exclusions, based on the context of the speech and the intentions of the speaker. He does this to differentiate between serious speech acts that will be performative, and non-serious speech, such as acting, playing, unauthorised citing etc., which will not be performative. In other

words he thinks that articulating the context and intentions of the speech fixes the meaning of these speech acts and renders them performative (or not). The failure of a speech act to be performative is thus established as a contingent possibility. Derrida brings his now familiar critique of presence and deconstruction of the literal and the metaphorical to bear and demonstrates that the question of context can never be fixed.<sup>21</sup> He demonstrates that this speech act theory is based on (an untenable) notion of privileged access to self-present meanings and intentions and that the non-serious speech acts excluded as exceptions to the rule, and thus as contingent possibilities, are rather instead the model for performative utterance in general.

In order to see this we need to move from the idea of writing in a traditional sense (which Austin excludes in his speech act theory) to Derrida's understanding of 'writing' which includes spoken as well as written marks (as I explained in chapter 1). This undermines the possibility of privileged access to self-present meanings and (the fixing of) intentions on which Austin's account of the successful functioning of performative speech relies, precisely because of its graphematic structure and *différance*.

Indeed, Derrida claims, "*Différance*, the irreducible absence of intention or assistance from the performative statement, from the most event-like statement possible, is what as that which 'authorizes' him to posit the general graphematic structure of *every* communication" (1982: 327

---

<sup>21</sup>In taking to task ordinary language philosophy in this way Derrida is accused of doing comparative literature rather than philosophy, though this is clearly not my view. Although a debate on this issue is outside of my concerns the arguments in this thesis would serve to refute such a view.



my emphasis). What is at stake here is the replacement of the logic of repetition with the graphic of iterability.

Derrida's work in general is marked by a movement from a structuring logic that characterises logocentrism to a graphic or graphematic structuring (as discussed in chapter 1 and which bears developing here). Hence for example, the graphic of the trace replaces the logic of origin, the graphic of *différance* replaces the logic of identity and the graphic of supplementarity replaces the logic of non-contradiction as Spivak (1980) points out. The significance of this shift and the meaning of the term 'graphematic', are eloquently conveyed when she says that these terms imply the "structure of irreducible self-alterity carried by the backward and forward and many-planed tracing of intentions in writing" (Spivak 1980: 36-7).

Derrida employs the graphic of iterability to develop the notion of citation away from a mere mechanical repetition and to suggest instead a repeatability which implies otherness and the possibility of alteration within it. Iterability is an *iter-ation*, and as such in a typical deconstructive strategy it undermines the possibility of self-identity. Hence Derrida takes the premise that the possibility of communication rests on the condition that every mark, or sign, can be cited and adds to that the notion of iterability in order to tease out the implications of this citability, beyond those assumed in speech act theory. He argues that precisely because any mark can be cited it can

break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the

contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring. (Derrida 1982: 320)<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, this is not the only point he makes. Significantly he goes on,

This citationality, duplication, or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is not an accident or an anomaly. but is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could no longer even have a so-called "normal" functioning. What would a mark be that one could not cite? And whose origin could not be lost on the way. (Derrida 1982: 321)

Derrida's point is that if we accept the graphematic structure of all locution then it is marked by the absence of presence and the possibility of iteration (citational grafting as opposed to mechanical repetition). In this case not only are the impossibility of the fixing of meaning and/or context highlighted but the possibility of failure becomes a structural element (along with the possibility of the absence of speaker and receiver) rather than a contingent possibility as Austin suggests. Moreover all utterances become performative, enacting what they name rather than some being simply constative.

Hence the ritual that Austin cites as the binding context (e.g. the marriage ceremony, the launch of a ship) is replaced by Derrida in SEC with the notion of iterability. Thus "Ritual is not an eventuality, but, as iterability, is a structural characteristic of every mark" (Derrida 1982: 324). Or, as Butler remarks, Derrida "substitutes the term 'iterability for

---

<sup>22</sup>Although the reference here is 1982 SEC was in fact first delivered as a paper at the Congrès internationale des Sociétés de philosophie de langue française in Montreal in 1971. It was first translated into English in Volume 1 of *Gylph* in 1977 translated by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. The translation in MOP that I am citing here is by Alan Bass although it is the former translation that is included in *Limited Inc.* I mention this simply as a point of information and to avoid any confusion.



ritual, thus establishing a structural account of repetition in the place of a more semantically compounded sense of social ritual" (Butler 1997b: 165). Furthermore,

The binding power that Austin attributes to the speaker's intention in such illocutionary acts is more properly attributable to a citational force of the speaking, the iterability that establishes the authority of the speech act, but which establishes the non-circular character of that act. In this sense, every 'act' is an echo or citational chain, and it is its citationality that constitutes its performative force. (Butler 1993: 282 fn 5)

However, before I move on to considering the implications of this rethinking of performativity in the context of the concerns of this thesis, I want to return to the notion of intentionality, for a moment. It is important to note that although Derrida himself performatively aims to demonstrate the difficulties inherent in Austin's attempt to fix the meanings of speech acts in a particular situation, this not to disregard altogether any notion of intention. As Derrida emphasises towards the end of *Différance*, he is not concluding from this that consciousness, ordinary language, presence and speech acts etc. do not have any kind of relative specificity, "it is simply that these effects do not exclude what is generally opposed to them term by term, but on the contrary presupposes it in dyssemtrical fashion, as the general space of their possibility" (Derrida 1982: 327).

The point about intentionality in Austin's account then is that, it becomes a matter of self-presence as in the metaphysics of presence. Moreover, since for Derrida the undecidability of context is the condition of possibility of any mark (whether written or spoken) it also

involves his critique of the speech/writing opposition and brings in the question of desire - the desire for mastery that characterise logocentrism. Indeed Derrida acknowledges that this desire may be a fundamental part of human communication and being. That this is so in no way impugns these deconstructive insights. If anything it rather renders them more pertinent.

Further to this, Spivak makes the following salient point:

Events, objects, acts, meanings - as 'intended by the ego - as well as intentions themselves might well be the effects of desire precisely to have a self-identical intention that can produce interpretations. This is a limit that no concept of simple intentions can cross, for such a desire cannot be thought in terms of a fully intending subject. It remains irreducibly structural. Yet, even as intention is situated within such limits, Derrida insists that it is these very limits, demarcating intention, that produce it, and allow it to function as such. If this point is missed, then Derrida is seen as a nihilist. (Spivak 1980: 32)

And I would say that although his critics frequently miss this point, for his defenders and those who adapt his insights in their own projects it is an important aspect of their appreciation. Furthermore, as Derrida himself insists it is not possible to simply move beyond this metaphysical tradition in an act of volition; all you can do is deconstruct the founding elements hence:

Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as a non-conceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated. For example, writing as a classical concept carries with



it predicates = which have been subordinated, excluded or held in reserve by forces and according to necessities to be analyzed. It is these predicates (I have mentioned some) whose force of generality, generalization, and generativity find themselves liberated, grafted onto a 'new' concept of writing which also corresponds to whatever has *resisted* the former organization of forces, which has constituted the remainder irreducible to the dominant force which organized the - to say it quickly - logocentric hierarchy. (Derrida 1982: 329-330)

One response to all this is to drown in the impossibility of presence: to dwell on the impossibility of language, to dwell on the impossibility of saying anything, in an essential sense. A more fruitful response, it seems to me would be to focus instead on the productive power of language in its performativity and its materiality. And one example of someone who does this is Judith Butler, whose notion of performativity I discuss in some detail in chapter 5.

Butler adapts this notion of performativity in precisely this way. Further to this, she argues that rethinking performativity in terms of citationality and resignification allows taking on board important psychoanalytic insights without succumbing to the reification of normative sexuality and its inherent misogyny (1993: 21). This approach involves rethinking the body, and specifically the matter of bodies, as a social construction, as I discuss in chapter 3 and will return to in chapter 5. It also allows her to focus on the role of the heterosexist imperative in all this, enabling certain sexed identifications and excluding others. Butler conceives of a realm of abject unintelligible bodies which 'don't matter' but which form a necessary constitutive

outside to the realm of intelligible bodies that 'do matter'. This realm is not conceived as a reverse discourse in a Foucauldian sense but as an excluded realm, which therefore represents the possibility of return as in a psychoanalytic model. In *Bodies that Matter*<sup>23</sup> Butler discusses the political promise of citationality through the "contentious practices of 'queerness'". The aim of these is to work to "resignify the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy" (Butler 1993: 21). This move is not presented in terms of a reverse discourse because then the affirmation of queerness involved would reinstate that which it sought to oppose - compulsory heterosexuality - by remaining within the same logic. Hence the political purpose of the public affirmation of queer practices is rather to effect "a politicization of abjection in an effort to rewrite the history of the term and to force it into a demanding resignification" (Butler 1993: 21). The aim is radical: to resignify the symbolic domain itself and shift the chain of possible citations "toward a more possible future" (Butler 1993: 22). This is clearly a deconstructive move and Butler is able to make it because the Derridian notion of performativity allows her to rethink the Lacanian symbolic. Rather than a quasi-permanent structure, as Lacan would seem to suggest, it becomes in her account the temporalised regularisation of signification, which "will take seriously the Lacanian challenge to Anglo-American accounts of gender, to consider the status of 'sex' as a linguistic norm but which recasts that normativity in Foucaultian terms as a regulatory ideal" (Butler 1993: 22). Thus she aims to challenge the "structural stasis" of normative heterosexuality in psychoanalytic accounts whilst retaining that which she sees as valuable. This too is what Derrida does. It allows Butler to include a

---

<sup>23</sup>An earlier version of the chapter in which Butler discusses this was also published in 1993 in *GLQ*, Vol. 1, No.1.



notion of repression and foreclosure in any formative moment and thus take seriously the psychoanalytic concepts of repression and foreclosure without reifying the duality of sexual difference as both Freud and Lacan tend to do. To reiterate, in rethinking performativity in terms of citationality and resignification Butler is able to avoid reifying the heterosexual norm and the misogyny it entails.

So to sum up, what Butler finds most useful about Lacan is his view of sex as a symbolic position. Her most salient criticism (in *Bodies that Matter*) is that this version of sex and sexual difference, gender and desire, is premised on an implicit framework of normative heterosexuality. It is this that she seeks to challenge in her critique of Lacan's notion of the symbolic order. Butler rejects Lacan's view of the fixity of the phallus as the founding moment in the symbolic order because of her view of the signifying process. Her point is that notwithstanding the contemporary privileging of the phallus it is, nevertheless, always in a process of signification and resignification. As such the phallus is not so much the founding moment of the symbolic order as Lacan would have it but rather it is part of a reiterable signifying practice. It is this that provides the possibility for change, for resignification.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed Derrida also takes issue with Lacan over the reification of sexual duality and in particular the indivisibility of castration to which Lacan would seem to subscribe. In his discussion of Lacan's 'Seminar on the

---

<sup>24</sup> Her argument in *Bodies That Matter* involves a turn to the lesbian phallus and a discussion of the way in which the hegemonic imaginary - the phallus is an imaginary effect - constitutes itself through the naturalisation of an exclusionary heterosexual morphology. Her aim is to rewrite the morphological imaginary in order both to promote an alternative to this imaginary which displaces the symbolic of heterosexist sexual difference, and to expose the ways in which the naturalisation of an exclusionary heterosexual morphology happens.

Purloined Letter' in the *Post Card* (Derrida 1987) Derrida makes a number of charges against Lacan. One of the main problems for Derrida is that for Lacan the symbolic order is based on what is for Derrida is an untenable transcendental signified: i.e. the phallus, which remains as that which gives meaning to everything else but which is itself unquestioned. Lacan is accused of succumbing to the metaphysics of presence because the phallus, and castration (which signifies lack) remain indivisible and because Derrida insists that Lacan maintains a link between femininity and truth in his interpretation of Poe's story (which is the basis of the seminar) which remain as the ultimate signified.<sup>25</sup> Deconstructive insights, in contrast to this, do not depend on any ultimate reification of sexual difference or duality. They do not support a heterosexist norm. In my view this is one of their greatest strengths.

## Conclusion

Derrida brings an emphasis on the role of exclusions, force and signification, in the construction of any presence and norms - an absent presence that provides the conditions of possibility for any 'thing'. However for Derrida this absent presence never can become present. This is the basic premise of his case against the metaphysics of presence. But this does not mean that any search for meaning should be abandoned, it is rather expressive of concern with how meanings are produced and that which is excluded in logocentrism. His concern therefore is with the limits of meaning..

---

<sup>25</sup>Psychoanalytic feminists tend to argue that Derrida is too critical of Lacan here and view his criticisms unsympathetically e.g. Johnson (1977), Felman (1987), Howells (1999).



Foucault brings an emphasis on power and normalisation; that is on the productive force of power in social regulation. This power manifested in discourses works on and through bodies to produce subjects who are subjected. Foucault is concerned also with the absent other but after *Madness and Civilisation* comes to recognise that there simply is no radical alterity, no absolute otherness. Thus he turns his attention to exclusions within discourse; to marginality and the role of discourse in the production of the same/other distinction and how that can be transgressed. How power works on and through bodies in a productive sense and the question of subjugated knowledges and reverse discourses. He does not therefore have a sense of something outside discourse; something that is not captured in discourse and thus his account seems to imply a sense of closure that Derrida's manages to avoid.

Perhaps this is due to Foucault's failure to engage with psychoanalytic concepts, in any systematic way. In his haste to reject psychoanalysis for its complicity in the 'repressive hypothesis', and its role as part of the disciplinary framework and surveillance - bio-power - Foucault does not develop the kind of insights concerning the role of a cultural unconscious that are to be found in Derrida's work. There is however in Foucault's work a notion of subjects and subjectivities changing overtime, in accordance with social conditions and the development of new discourses. Hence one source of change (as a local intervention) for him would be the establishment of reverse discourses. Indeed some feminists have adopted this model. Nevertheless, I have argued that, ultimately, his account of the workings of bio-power seems to result in the production of 'docile bodies' and theoretically precludes the space for change. This is despite his own best intentions. Reverse

discourses are rather problematic in that they tend ultimately to reinforce that which they seek to challenge, because they stay within the same logic.

In contrast to Foucault's account I have argued that Derrida's notion of a structural unconscious as in his notion of writing, and relatedly *différance* and iterability, does however provide the theoretical space for change, precisely because it does not involve a sense of closure, or mechanical repetition. Although Derrida does not apply this to the problematic of rethinking the body, subjectivity or corporeal difference I have argued that it can usefully be employed in this way. I have suggested Judith Butler as an example of someone whose work has moved in this direction. This is not however to say that the strategy of examining exclusions within discourse is of no use at all. Indeed Butler's notion of homosexual bodies as abjected, excluded, marginalised is a production within discourse or language. However Butler adds to this the notion of iterability in her account of performativity and so escapes the determinism of Foucault's account, as I will demonstrate in chapter 5.

To return for a moment to the Foucault/ Derrida debate, Roy Boyne (who considers this debate in some detail. though I have not) suggests "Foucault's new formulation of power is precisely Derridian, an application of the critique of presence, but done from within an historical sociology rather than from within philosophy" (Boyne 1990: 114). In his genealogy Foucault takes to task the language of reason that dominates the human sciences and, like Derrida, rejects the possibility of any inherent significance in the world or in consciousness. Boyne further suggests that Foucault's turn to the body may well have been a



response to Derrida's textualism (Foucault was as critical of this as anyone); and that Foucault was thereby providing "a demonstration in counterpoint of what he thought to be the latter's inconsequential pedagogy" (Boyne 1990: 111). Hence Boyne describes the difference between Foucault and Derrida as a difference of focus rather than of form. I'm not sure to what extent this may be true, given the reservations I have made in this chapter. But the point I want to highlight is his conclusion that

The ultimate lesson of the Foucault Derrida debate is that there is no pure other, that ontological difference is a chimera. This means that there is no bright promise on the other side of reason. It also means, if all is on our side that there is no reason, *outside of our reach*, why we cannot generate our own bright hopes for a different future. (Boyne 1990: 170)

This is precisely my point, and Butler's, who I discuss in the next chapter; and to do so entails rethinking the body, corporeality and sexual difference, along the lines suggested here.

## Chapter 5

### Judith Butler: Performance and Performativity

As I've argued in the chapter 3, one of the main strengths of Butler's attempt to theorise gendered embodiment lies in her refusal to accept any notion of sexual difference as irreducible. In particular, her attempt to understand sexual difference as something which is not simply given and therefore immutable but rather as something which is socially constituted to function as given, to function as an ontological category. This then raises a series of questions: How to theorise corporeality in its materiality as something that is socially constituted and as such open to history, culture and the possibility of change, whilst accepting, also, that in any particular embodied being there are elements of identity that become entrenched, that are 'durable but not immutable'<sup>1</sup>. How to acknowledge the bodily roots of gender identity and to theorise them as socially (rather than biologically) given without succumbing to either cultural determinism or some sort of voluntarism. How to retain a concept of agency and the possibility of resistance and change within this. How to transform the binary code that organises the gender hierarchy. Finally, how to reconcile the view that sexual difference is but one difference amongst others with feminists concerns to assert the primacy of sexual difference.

Butler attempts to answer these questions in her notion of performativity and it is this that I am going to examine in this chapter.

---

<sup>1</sup>I borrow this phrase from McNay 1999.



Through this she attempts to explain the relationship between the body and identity in linguistic terms. That is, she attempts to explain the relationship between the body, identity and signification (or the social). In so doing not only does Butler avoid the problems associated with sexual difference theorists and some body image theorists concerning sexual difference identified in chapter 3. She also avoids some of the limitations of recent (male) theories of 'reflexive identity transformation' that have become popular in contemporary social theory (e.g. Giddens 1992, Featherstone 1992). These latter accounts are also concerned with the role of the symbolic. However, as McNay argues they tend to place too much emphasis on "the expressive possibilities thrown up by the processes of detraditionalisation" (McNay 1999: 97) because they do not adequately address the embodied pre-reflexive aspects in the constitution of identity. It is precisely these aspects that Butler is trying to accommodate in *The Psychic Life of Power*, where, in examining the ways in which these pre-reflexive, embodied aspects are both linguistically instituted and intrinsic to the process of *assujettissement* (becoming both a subject and subjected) Butler is trying to render those aspects 'durable but not immutable', historical and cultural rather than biologically or psychically given.

### **Gender as Performance and Performativity**

Let me begin by drawing attention to the fundamental role (compulsory) heterosexuality (and relatedly heterosexism), plays in Butler's attempt to theorise gender as performance and performative, for this 'queer' concern marks a major difference between her work and the work of Derrida and speech act theory on which she draws. Butler's notion of the performativity of identity categories in general,

and gender in particular, is rooted in an understanding of heterosexuality as a matter of imitation and parody and, as such, essentially unstable. Indeed this instability is, for Butler, a constitutive instability, and it is precisely this constitutive instability that enables the possibility of resistance and change.

Drawing on the work of Foucault, Lacan, Wittig and Kristeva in, the now classic, *Gender Trouble*, and Derrida's reworking of speech act theory in the follow up *Bodies That Matter*, Butler provides an influential analysis of sex, gender and desire as forms of enforced cultural performance, an impersonation or mime of an impossible ideal, that came to be considered as both a seminal contribution to feminist gender theory and a founding contribution to the nineties phenomenon 'queer theory'.<sup>2</sup> In this radically anti-essentialist, anti-foundationalist account of identity categories not only does sex become a cultural construct along with gender, so too does the body (as discussed in chapter 3).

The starting point of this account of subjectivity and the body is Foucault's view of power and normalisation, adapted to feminist concerns. Butler builds on the Foucauldian notion that subjects are discursively produced and that this does not involve the notion of a

---

<sup>2</sup>Although, as Butler states in *Gender Trouble*, her aim was to intervene in feminist theory and debates about social constructionism and the sex/gender distinction, her work has attracted the label 'queer theory'. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that this queer theory is concerned with rethinking sex, sexuality and desire. Another is the shift in focus from gender to heterosexuality that her notion of gender as performance and performativity entails. Another is her discussion of her own lesbian identity which she both acknowledges and questions as a category. But perhaps the most significant, defining feature is that her work involves bringing the insights of gay and lesbian perspectives on sexuality and inter-sex desire onto the nature of heterosexuality as an institution, rather than the other way around, and then tracing the epistemological implications of this. For a discussion of the relationship between feminism and queer theory in general, and Butler's work in particular, see Butler 1994b. For a discussion of the intersection of sociology and queer theory see Seidman (1996).



prior subject on whom power and discourses act, but rather that a subject is formed through their discursively constituted identity. She develops the notion of performativity to explain how this works in relation to gender identity; to show how discourses produce sexed and gendered subjects in a way that allows for the possibility of gender practices as sites of change - without succumbing to the limitations of Foucault's own account and falling back on a notion of a pre-discursive body, that is a body outside culture and signification. She also both criticises, and increasingly draws on, psychoanalysis, linking Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis - that is the idea that sex is somehow innate but repressed (Foucault 1984) as discussed in chapter 4 - to her critique of (her interpretation of) the Lacanian account of subjectivity. She takes from this latter account the idea that identity involves multiple and co-existing identifications and that gender identifications are 'phantasmatic'. As such they are not something that is given in biology. They are impossible to embody, and they are not something with which 'a self' could ever entirely coincide.

Basically Butler is rejecting an account of gender in which gender is the cultural inscription of a biological sex. She is arguing instead that there is nothing given about gender nor is there any pre-discursive or pre-cultural sex that provides the basis for the cultural construction of gender. The sex/gender distinction which allowed early second wave feminists to avoid and challenge biological determinism and to examine the cultural production of gender is rejected as inadequate to the understanding of the cultural production of sex as itself a gendered category.

Initially this then was an attempt to intervene in feminist gender theory of the 1980s and move beyond the sex/gender distinction that had become central to (Anglo-American and Australian) feminist theory during the 1970s and early 1980s and which underpinned the 'essentialism versus constructionism' debates that characterised that period. This distinction had been useful in early attempts to denaturalise gender and avoid biological determinism by highlighting the cultural diversity in constructions of masculinity and femininity. However it does seem to involve posing gender as a cultural overlay to a basic biological category which is taken as given. As such it came to be seen as problematic for later feminists concerned with deconstructing such binary oppositions, and the essentialism/constructionism dichotomy and extending constructionist ideas to include the physical as well as the social world. Indeed, for Butler, there is nothing about sex, gender or sexuality that is given. She is rather concerned to examine the ways in which these categories come to be established as foundational, and their pivotal role in what she terms compulsory heterosexuality.

More recently, amongst queer theorists, there has been a resurgence of arguments for radically separating gender from sexuality (e.g. Sedgwick 1990, Whittle 1996). However Butler argues for rethinking this distinction in terms of a set of non-causal, non-reductive relations that somehow accommodate the interimplication of gender and sexuality. Her notion of the performativity of gender is an attempt to do this.

Her basic premise is that embodied selves 'do not pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies' (Butler 1988: 526) but rather "the foundational categories of identity - the binary of sex,



gender and the body-can be shown as productions that *create the effect* of the natural, the original and the inevitable" (Butler 1990: viii, my emphasis). Hence she wants to expose these foundational categories and desire as 'effects of a specific formation of power' (1990: x) (in a Foucauldian Nietzschean sense) and reveal the ways that what she calls, 'the regulatory norms of sex' work in a performative fashion to materialise sexual difference (as ontological difference), and constitute the materiality of bodies in the service of what she refers to initially (in *Gender Trouble*) as the heterosexual matrix, but which later becomes heterosexual hegemony (in *Bodies That Matter*).

Underlying all her work is a concern with a critique of the political construction and regulation of identity categories and the possibilities for political transgression within this. She wants to challenge the naturalisation of identity categories such as sex, gender, the body and desire and foreground the role of a hegemonic conceptual scheme characterised as compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism in their production. These are conceived, in Foucauldian fashion, as regimes of power/discourse (Butler 1990: xi). It is these that produce sex as a causal, or foundational, category and gender categories as ontological categories and then it is these ontological categories that support both gender hierarchies and compulsory heterosexuality.

Indeed her stated aim in *Gender Trouble* is twofold. She wants to establish a critical genealogy of the construction of identity categories sex, gender, desire, the body, woman within a binary frame conditioned by 'compulsory' heterosexuality and phallogocentrism; and to destabilise both these categories and the epistemological and ontological regime that produced them (Butler 1990: xi) She wants to

reveal that heterosexuality and the binary sex system on which it is based are both compulsory and yet permanently unstable and to argue that this instability opens up the space for alternative configurations and significations.

How then does this work? What exactly is involved when Butler invokes the notion of gender as performance and says that gender is performative?

### **Gender as enforced cultural performance**

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is a kind of enforced cultural performance and that, as such, it is performative. In saying that gender is performative she is saying that rather than expressing some inner core or pre-given identity the performance of gender produces retroactively the illusion of such a core or essence. These then become cultural effects. She also argues that it is a ritualised repetition of conventions shaped and compelled by compulsory heterosexuality that produces gender. She refers to these as 'sustained social performances' which create the reality of gender, but which, crucially, are not separable from agents preceding those performances.

Nevertheless one of the main causes of controversy in the reception of *Gender Trouble* arose from the tendency to associate the notion of performance with theatrical models of subjectivity which imply that there is an actor who stands outside the act and does the acting; and



voluntarism which implies that there is some sort of everyday optionality about sex, gender and the body even.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover Butler's account of the performativity of gender does involve a notion of performance and does often invoke a sense of theatricality which contributes to this confusion. The association of performance with drag and then drag with subversion in *Gender Trouble* also contributes to the voluntarist interpretation. Nevertheless as Butler (1993) stresses in *Bodies That Matter* (and a number of other places e.g. Butler 1988, 1991) emphasising the distinction between a theatrical notion of performance and the notion of performance associated with performativity, the model that she is positing is not a theatrical model but rather a speech act model based on a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity. Indeed this is a distinction Butler stresses from her very earliest work and one that she continues to emphasise as she develops her notion of performativity in later works (Butler 1997a, 1997b). As it is an important distinction to grasp in getting to grips with Butler's work as a whole and, in particular, her political strategies and understanding of social change, it is worth dwelling on it a little longer.

### **Performative Acts and Gender Constitution**

In an early paper entitled 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution' Butler (1988) makes clear the distinction between a theatrical model of performance and her own notion of performance that is performative

---

<sup>3</sup>This notion of performing identity has been taken up and applied in a number of studies, particularly in the context of performing lesbian identity (Kaplan 1992, Weston 1993, Koestenbaum 1991, Esterberg 1996). It has also been widely criticised (e.g. Tyler 1991).

by distinguishing between the notions of acts, performance, role etc. to be found in the dramaturgical models employed in both the phenomenological work of Edmund Husserl and Merleau Ponty, and the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, and her own notion of performance, acts and performativity. This, she argues, lies in the constituting role of the 'doer', a or choosing subject behind these acts (and her own focus on gender). Whereas these accounts seem to posit a 'true self', a 'doer' who is doing the acting in Butler's notion of performance the 'doer' is produced in and by the act but importantly does not stand outside or before it. This is an important distinction and one which Butler continues to emphasize (Butler 1992a, 1993, 1994a) as she develops the notion of performativity. She argues here "In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief" (Butler 1988: 520). It is in this sense that gender is intentional, non-referential and contingent.

Butler argues that this view of gender as performance which is performative is therefore far removed from an understanding of gender as a role undertaken by a pre-existing self, and thus represents a marked departure from, say, Goffman's account of role in the *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* "which posits a self which assumes and exchanges various 'roles' within complex social expectations of the 'game' of modern life" (Butler 1988: 528). The whole point is that Butler rejects the view of gender acts as expressive



of a core identity, of something prior to the acts themselves that is the cultural, spiritual or psychological correlates of a biological sex<sup>4</sup>.

It is also a departure from the social constructionist models of sex and sexuality that had been developing in sociology and anthropology, initially drawing on the theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism and labelling theory. As Epstein (1996) argues in these disciplines classic work such as McIntosh (1968) 'The Homosexual Role', and later Plummer (1975), Weeks (1977) paved the way for the growth of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory in the 1980s and 1990s. The basic premise was that against essentialist understandings of sexuality including homosexuality whether in biological or psychological terms it is in fact socially constructed. It was argued that 'sexual meanings, identities and categories were intersubjectively negotiated social and historical products' (Epstein 1996, p.145).

Moreover Epstein identifies a significant difference between this earlier sociological concern with the social construction of (homo)sexuality and later 'queer' concerns which also applies to Butler. That is the latter's apparently paradoxical insistence on the centrality of marginality to the study of society and culture (Epstein 1996, p 147). Thus as Namaste argues, in the same collection, although the earlier sociological approaches provided a welcome corrective to pathological models of homosexuality and psychologistic explanations of homosexual behaviour, nevertheless the focus remained on the social organisation of homosexual behaviour and identity, rather than, as in queer theory, the social reproduction of heterosexuality and its place as

---

<sup>4</sup>That this interpretation of Goffman might be disputed is another matter, the point remains the same.

a central organising principle in all of social life<sup>5</sup>. Indeed similar distinctions can be made within feminist theory where until very recently heterosexuality has largely also remained untheorised and taken for granted (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993).

### **In what sense then is gender an act?**

Gender then far from being an internal property of a pre-existing subject, a stable identity or 'locus of agency' is an identity which is tenuously constituted in time through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Moreover the body plays a vital role in all this - but not as in the naturalistic fallacy; that the gendered body is performative 'suggests it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (Butler 1990: 136). Rather, in the Foucauldian sense of a 'surface politics of the body' in which gender becomes 'an enacted fantasy or incorporation' acts, gestures desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the *surface* of the body. "Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler 1990: 136, original emphasis). In other words "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organising gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (P.136) and serve to locate the 'cause' of acts, gender, desire within the

---

<sup>5</sup>This collection discusses the intersection of sociology and queer theory generally and several of the papers discuss aspects of Butler's work. Namaste is concerned to argue for a convergence of the insights of sociological and poststructuralist approaches which seem to have been concerned independently with similar issues and could benefit from each others insights.



self while simultaneously occluding from view their political regulation and production in disciplinary practices. Gender and identity then are posed as 'truth effects' of a discourse of a stable, primary identity or psychological core. However Butler argues that far from being stable and coherent, something that precedes action, identity is rather a temporal process which is tenuously constituted in time through the '*stylized repetition of acts*'.<sup>6</sup> It is through this that the illusion of a stable fixed identity is promoted, perpetuated and believed.

Indeed she becomes increasingly concerned with the psychic aspect of identity as she develops her notion of performativity in later reworkings of Foucault's view of power and engagements with Althusser and psychoanalysis (1997b) which I will discuss in due course. For now however, the point to note is that she is concerned even in *Gender Trouble* with the construction of the interiority/ exteriority binary divide. Her account attempts to accommodate interior features of the self without succumbing to essentialist understandings or, as yet, psychoanalytic explanations. She argues "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalises nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (1990, p.140). Gender then becomes a regulatory ideal, rooted in another regulatory ideal - that of reproductive heterosexuality, which constructs the fiction of its own psychological interiority.

---

<sup>6</sup>She uses 'style' in sense of Sartre's 'a style of being', Foucault's 'stylistics of existence' and her interpretation of de Beauvoir's view of bodies as "styles of the flesh". She says, "these styles all never fully self-styled, for styles have a history and those histories condition and limit the possibilities"(1990: 139).

## **Performance, Imitation and Drag: The Critique of Heterosexuality**

Butler draws on the insights of gay and lesbian sexuality and same sex desire to argue that the regulatory ideal of reproductive heterosexuality is exposed as a fiction by gender discontinuities in lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex and desire and sexuality does not seem to follow from gender. The disciplinary production of gender creates a false stabilisation and coherence in the interests of reproductive heterosexuality and as such is a regulatory fiction that conceals these discontinuities which undermine the expressive model of gender identity. Yet when they are taken into account "The regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe" (Butler 1990. p. 136).

Although she takes from Monique Wittig the idea that sex is the political category which founds society as heterosexual, she disagrees with her account in two important ways: she rejects her view of gay and lesbian sexuality as outside of and radically 'other' to, heterosexuality and she rejects her presumption of a humanist subject. Butler suggests rather that the insight of gay/lesbian perspectives on sexuality is that heterosexuality is both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself.

Heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as compulsory law, but as



an inevitable and intrinsic comedy...a constant parody of itself.  
(Butler 1990: 122).

Gay and lesbian relationships do not mime an originary heterosexuality they rather mark the imitative structure and constitutive tenuousness of heterosexuality itself. Gender then becomes a mime of an ideal, constituted through regulatory norms.

In *Gender Trouble* (and in Butler 1991) she develops the notion of heterosexuality as involving parody and imitation by associating gender with drag, drawing on Esther Newton's *Mother Camp*. The argument is that "drag is not an imitation or a copy of some prior and true gender; according to Newton, drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed" (1991: .28). Thus, she argues, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (Butler 1990: 137). Gender, Butler argues, rather than being a foundational category as in the naturalistic view, is "a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (Butler 1990: viii). This notion of imitation and gender parody does not imply an original: "The parody is of the very notion of an original" (p.138). "To be more precise it is a product which, in effect - that is in its effects - postures as an imitation" (p.138).

### **Parody, Politics and Subversion**

The significance of all this for Butler is that heterosexuality is therefore both compulsory and fundamentally unstable. Unstable, as Deutscher puts it, "because of the perpetual need for reiteration and re-enactment because parody lies at the heart of 'natural' gender" (Deutscher 1997: 26). Compulsory in the sense that "acting out of line with heterosexual

norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions" (Butler 1991: 24). This then "can become an occasion for a subversive and proliferating parody of gender norms in which the very claim to originality and to the real is shown to be the effect of a certain kind of naturalized gender mime" (Butler 1991: 23). "This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization: parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities" (p.138).

However Butler goes further than this denaturalisation of heterosexist gender categories. As I mentioned earlier her stated aims in *Gender Trouble* were not only to denaturalise but also to *destabilise* identity categories such as sex, gender, desire and the body and the epistemic ontological regime that produced them. Thus she goes on to claim:

As a strategy to denaturalize and resignify bodily categories, I describe and propose a set of parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of the body , sex, gender and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame. (Butler, 1990 xii).

And this claim has attracted much criticism. Indeed the whole question of parody as politics and subversion has proved very problematic. *Gender Trouble* has been interpreted in the main as arguing for the proliferation of drag performances as particularly subversive of gender norms.



Quite how this destabilization is to be effected and how subversive this is as a strategy is another matter. Deutscher for instance suggests that "Butler is not discussing subversion as political strategy, but rather as something which lies at the heart of all reproducibility" (Deutscher 1997: 26). Gender norms are enabled by their own internal instability, by the necessity of reproducibility and parody. Nevertheless, she points out, for Butler "the enabling function of parody retains some kind of *promise* as subversive...Parody shows that gender norms are not stable. Parody opens up, she will say, the possibility for new configurations" (Deutscher 1997: 27). However, there is some ambiguity here, as Deutscher argues, as Butler sometimes also seems to close down the association between parody and subversion suggesting rather that parody would result simply in a "temporary and futile disruption of the hegemony of the paternal law" (Deutscher 1997: 26 citing Butler 1990: 81).

Indeed Butler herself goes on to argue in *Bodies That Matter* that drag is not necessarily subversive. Moreover in Butler (1994a) she insists that although in *Gender Trouble* she aims at discursive resignifications through a politics of gender parody and drag, drag is offered nevertheless as an example of performativity not as the paradigm of performativity that it is often taken to be. Thus she comments in *Bodies that Matter*:

As 'Paris is Burning' made clear drag is not unproblematically subversive. It serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure. But there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality

will lead to its subversion. Heterosexuality can augment its hegemony through its denaturalization, as when we see denaturalizing parodies that reidealize heterosexual norms without calling them into question.

(Butler 1993, p.231)

Nevertheless her point is still that it can be subversive, enabling social and political resignifications. As she says in an interview in *Radical Philosophy* in 1994, "we don't know when resistance is going to be recouped or when it will be groundbreaking. It's like breaking through to a new set of paradigms" (Butler 1994a: 38). Moreover in true Foucauldian vein she argues that this is but one site of struggle amongst others.

Basically, she is arguing that since gender is constructed through relations of power inherent in normative constraints that work through a process of ritualised repetition to both produce and regulate bodily beings (in all their diversity - those that matter and those that do not), then this repetition provides both the space and the possibility for change. What is required is a critical reworking of those gender norms. In *Gender Trouble* this takes the form of a politics of parody, cross dressing etc. She develops the notion of performativity in *Bodies That Matter* (Butler 1993) (and later *Excitable Speech*, Butler 1997b) drawing on Derrida's reworking of Austin's speech act theory, to show how discourses produce subjects, and that this is a continual process.

In *Bodies That Matter* concerned to address accusations that in *Gender Trouble* she neglects the materiality of the body as a biological entity Butler links the materialization of the body to the performativity of



gender. She draws on speech act theory via Derrida's critique of Austin and his argument with John Searle to develop her account by linking the performativity of gender to the materiality and materialization of the body and in particular she tells us (Butler 1994a) she wanted to return to the category of sex, which she had perhaps dismissed a little too hastily in *Gender Trouble*, to examine how sex is produced as a norm.

She emphasises and extends her earlier distinction between performativity and performance to argue that "Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms" (Butler 1993: 95). Performativity therefore is reworked as citationality. It involves "a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain and exceed the performer" (p. 234) As a reiterative and citational practice "A performative act is one which brings into being or enacts that which it names, and so marks the constitutive or productive power of discourse" (Butler 1995: 134). Performative speech acts are those that in being spoken simultaneously perform an action and exercise a power that is binding. Butler gives the example in terms of gender performativity of the pronouncement at birth of 'It's a girl' (Butler 1993: 232). This inaugurates the citation and embodying of the appropriate gender norms necessary for the girl to become a viable (girl) subject. This process of girling is not entered into by an intentional subject as a matter of choice. Butler links it to Althusser's notion of interpellation. This refers to the ideological process of 'calling' a person to the position 'named'. It involves both the demarcation of boundaries and the inculcation of norms. Therefore once again she stresses that performativity needs to be distinguished from the notion of performance in the sense of role play.

Performativity, she argues 'is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established' (Butler 1994b: 3).

Where performance implies a 'doer behind the deed', that is a subject standing outside of, but doing the performing, performativity she now argues, is about the temporal production of the subject, the 'I', the 'we', the 'doer' in a network of power/discourse. This is not to imply the final production of a fully constituted subject however but a continual, iterable process of constitution and reconstitution and which, importantly, is open to resignification from within.<sup>7</sup>

Performativity, then, needs to be understood in terms of signification and resignification and most importantly as involving a process of repetition and recitation. It is this that provides the possibility for resignifications or rearticulations. The 'doer' she insists in *Feminist Contentions* Butler (1995) is not an intentional subject who stands behind the deed as its originator. It is rather constituted within it. "The 'doer' will be the uncertain working of the discursive possibilities by which it itself is worked" (Butler 1995: 135).

Performativity consists of the reiteration of norms which 'precede, constrain and exceed the performer... further what is 'performed' works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remain opaque, unconscious unperformable" (Butler 1993: 234). Indeed it is this open-ended process of repetition and recitation that provides the conditions of possibility

---

<sup>7</sup>Drucilla Cornell (1992) takes up this notion of iterability and gender and allies it with Luhman's systems theory as a means of attending to structural features of gender relations. The main problem for Butler is to show how the resignification that the constant process of iterability and citation enables is (or can be) operationalised. As I will discuss later, one criticism is precisely that her account does not allow for the possibility of change from within.



for subversive repetition and thus agency. Although in this view 'we' as subjects cannot be separated from the discursive conventions through which we are constituted that there is the possibility of opposing and reworking them is crucial to it. For Butler the site of resistance comes through the necessary repetition involved in the production of gendered identities. In particular the constitutive instability at the heart of heterosexuality and the exclusions involved in the maintenance of the illusion of heterosexual coherence.

## Subjection

If, as Althusser implies, becoming a subject requires a kind of mastery indistinguishable from submission, are there perhaps political and psychic consequences to be wrought from such a founding paradox? (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p.30)

Butler develops this notion of exclusion further in *The Psychic Life of Power* subtitled *Theories in Subjection*. Her concern now is with "the question of how certain forms of disavowal and repudiation come to organise the performance of gender" (Butler 1997a: 145). This involves attention to the psychic side of identity. Indeed Butler has become increasingly concerned with this aspect and ever less satisfied with the relationship between interiority and exteriority in a Foucauldian framework that rejects psychoanalysis and the psyche, and conceives of power in terms of surface inscriptions. What Foucault neglected in his rejection of psychoanalysis as the 'repressive hypothesis' were the productive aspects of the regulation of desire. She argues that the regulation of desire works through foreclosure rather than repression. "As foreclosure, the sanction works not to prohibit existing desires but

to produce certain kinds of objects and to bar others from the field of social production" (Butler 1997a: 25) i.e. it operates as "a mechanism of production, one that can operate, however, on the basis of an originary violence" (Butler 1997a: 25).

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, then, her concern is with how this works through the (psychic) incorporation of norms and it becomes a question of the workings of desire: how the subjection of desire becomes the desire for subjection. Here she returns to Hegel, the subject of her first book *Subjects of Desire* and the idiosyncratic reading of the 'lordship and bondsman' section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that she provided there. The desire for recognition is reinterpreted in linguistic terms. Desire becomes the desire for existence. The route to this is through norms and social regulation that work through the establishment of primary dependencies and linguistic categories. Hence there is a primary (linguistic) vulnerability to power and exploitation (p.20). "[T]he subject pursues subordination as the promise of existence...Subjection exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from elsewhere; it marks a primary vulnerability to the Other in order to be" (p.21).

Or, as she puts it in *Excitable Speech*, "That one comes to 'be' through a dependency on the Other -- an Hegelian, and indeed, Freudian postulation -- must be recast in linguistic terms to the extent that the terms by which recognition is regulated, allocated, and refused are part of the larger social rituals of interpellation" (Butler (1997b: 26). She goes on "There is no way to protect against that primary vulnerability and susceptibility to the call of recognition that solicits existence, to that



primary dependency on a language we never made in order to acquire a tentative ontological status" (Butler (1997b: 26).

In other words it is only through being interpellated through linguistic categories that bodies come into social existence. This process inaugurates the being of (any)body either as an intelligible body/being or as abjected. It is not simply a matter of recognition in the Hegelian sense of self-reflection and the negation of externality, but rather that the 'call', the address in interpellation renders recognition (or abjection) possible: "the address constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition and, accordingly, outside of it, in abjection" (p.26). Thus in *Excitable Speech* she speaks about "the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects" (p.26). Moreover since language constitutes bodies in this way it can also threaten their existence. Hence Butler's aim here to chart the injurious aspects of language in her engagement with 'hate speech' (and Mackinnon's *Only Words*).

The possibilities of this account of subjection through interpellation reside in the fact that the terms that facilitate recognition/existence and simultaneously constitute the subjection and inauguration of social being are themselves socially produced and historically revisable. Though that is not to say that identity categories can simply be dispensed with, since the opposite is rather the case. For Butler turns to theories of subjection, and relocates speech acts as interpellation, in order to combine a Foucauldian theory of power with a psychoanalytic theory of the psyche. She wants to theorise the way that power, understood as social regulation, produces and regulates the psychic aspects of identity, moving beyond the rather simplistic notion of internalisation. This involves exploring the ways that subjection

involves both subordination to power and the production of 'stubborn' or 'passionate' attachments to identity categories. The term 'passionate' is used to convey the bodily aspect of those attachments in the Freudian sense that the ego is 'first and foremost a bodily ego'. Citing Nietzsche and Hegel she employs the figure of the turn in *The Psychic Life of Power* to explain the relationship between 'stubborn attachments and bodily subjection' and to argue that 'subjection must be traced in the turns of psychic life' and to explain how this works; how power that is apparently external to a subject acquires a psychic form that constitutes both self identity and subjectivity. This is not simply a matter of internalisation but rather the inauguration of identity and subjectivity. "[T]he turn appears to function as a tropological inauguration of the subject, a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain" (Butler 1997a: 3-4).

One sense of the turn that she invokes is in the sense of the subject turning to the policeman who hails him and recognising himself in that call, as in Althusser's notion of interpellation. Though note she insists she is not suggesting here that there is a prior subject who makes the turn, but rather that it is through the turn that the subject is constituted.

## **Melancholia**

Butler links this account to the Freudian notion of melancholic incorporation to explain why the subject turns towards the voice of the law - a question that she points out Althusser neglects. She is then able to employ the concept of 'passionate attachment' to explain how it is that in subjection subordination becomes the very possibility for



existence and subjectivity. Subjection, she argues, "must be traced in the peculiar turning of a subject against itself that takes place in acts of reproach, conscience, and melancholia that work in tandem with social regulation" (p.18-19).

The result of this is that gender becomes an effect of melancholia. Butler draws on Freud in 'The Ego and the Id' where he acknowledges melancholy as central to the formation of identifications that form the ego, an ego, moreover, that is 'first and foremost a bodily ego'. Butler explains that melancholia in a Freudian sense means 'the unfinished process of grieving' (p. 133). Freud argues that identifications formed through unfinished grief are the modes in which the lost object is incorporated and phantasmatically preserved in, and as, the ego (p.132). A refused loss is a way of preserving the object as part of the ego and therefore avoiding complete loss. The object is transformed from external to internal and this is described as melancholic incorporation. To argue that gender is an effect of such melancholic incorporation Butler argues that the bodily ego assumes a gendered morphology and therefore is also a gendered ego. She adds this to Freud's notion that masculinity and femininity are established through the loss of certain sexual attachments, and that those are not grieved. Masculinity and femininity are therefore achieved through pre-empting the possibility of homosexuality understood as ungrievable loss. She argues that the Oedipal conflict involves a presumption that heterosexualisation of desire is already accomplished and the distinction between hetero/homosexual is already enforced. This therefore depends on

taking masculinity and femininity as accomplishments not dispositions as Freud sometimes argues<sup>8</sup>

She argues "Freud articulates a cultural logic in which gender is achieved and stabilised through heterosexual positioning and any threats to heterosexuality become threats to gender itself" (p.136). She acknowledges that not all expressions of gender fit this formulation but argues that this does not invalidate the argument. The point is that heterosexuality is cultivated through prohibitions, one of which is homosexual attachment. Melancholia is the mechanism through which the psychic sphere is socially regulated according to established norms.

Butlers stated aim in this context is again two fold. She wants to explain the process through which the ego becomes gendered; and she wants to examine the implications of this (melancholic formation of gender) for life in a culture in which lost homosexual attachments cannot very well be mourned. She says her work represents a cultural engagement with psychoanalysis and highlights the lack of a public language of grief for the great many deaths through AIDS; the lack of conventions for acknowledging the loss of homosexual love. . She suggests this is emblematic of the ungrievability of homosexual attachment and heterosexist hegemony. She describes the production of melancholy through the compulsory production of heterosexuality (a heterosexual melancholy at work in the workings of gender). She wants to move from melancholia as a psychic economy in operation at

---

<sup>8</sup>Although in Butlers own account she discusses different accounts in Freud's work I am not going to engage with such issues here. I shall stick to the point and implications of Butlers deployment of the term.



the individual level to an understanding of melancholia as characterising in part of the workings of a social, regulatory power.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, then, Butler understands psychoanalysis to be linked with gender performativity and performativity to be linked with melancholia. This is in contrast to her understanding of psychoanalysis in *Gender Trouble*. In the latter she took the view that psychic concepts of gender could be explained through the performance of gender. In *The Psychic Life of Power* she rather wants to take from psychoanalysis the view that "the opacity of the unconscious sets limits on the exteriorization of the psyche" and that what is exteriorized or performed can only be understood by reference to what is barred from performance, what cannot and will not be performed" (p.145).

Gender melancholia is to be linked to the practice of gender performativity in the sense that if gender is produced as an effect of melancholia, as ungrieved loss, then the performance of gender might be seen as "acting out" (in the psychoanalytic sense) of unresolved grief. Acting out may be related to the problem of unacknowledged loss.

## **Drag**

This then has implications for Butler's view of drag. In *Gender Trouble* it is argued that drag marks the imitative structure of gender and heterosexuality, both of which are essentially unstable, impossible, inessential ideals. Whereas from the point of view of melancholic incorporation drag is a sort of 'acting out' grounded in unallowable

loss, that is a loss that is both refused and incorporated. Heterosexual gender is constituted through disavowals and homosexual attachments cannot easily be openly mourned in heterosexual culture.

The concern with instability continues. What shifts is her understanding of the (psychic) production of stability. Her point is that "drag exposes the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexualised genders form themselves through renouncing the possibility of homosexuality, a foreclosure that produces both a field of objects and a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love" (p.146). In *The Psychic Life of Power* then, drag has become an allegory of heterosexual melancholia. This leads Butler to the startling conclusion that the 'truest lesbian melancholic is a straight woman, and the truest gay male melancholic is a straight man'. She says she knows this argument is somewhat 'overstated' but that this is because she wants to emphasise the point that there is no necessary reason for identification and desire to be oppositional and to involve this form of repudiation. "We are made all the more fragile under the pressure of such rules and all the more mobile when ambivalence and loss are given dramatic language in which to do their acting out" (p.150).

The theatricality that she has consistently maintained is constitutive of our identities is glossed in *The Psychic Life of Power* by mourning. The 'acting out' which is produced by melancholia is clearly not voluntary. The issue of choice and everyday optionality recedes ever more from the bounds of possibility, along with the spectre of voluntarism.



However one problem that does remain, it seems to me, concerns the issue of desire. In her account of subjection Butler retains the notion of desire as a performative effect, which is all well and good in a sense, but the problem it raises concerns the issue of how to account for the variation in individual desires as translated into identity categories that are clearly not voluntary. If, in the heterosexual matrix certain desires are foreclosed, why and how do some people resist this foreclosure while others do not? Butler explains the performative production of intelligible and unintelligible bodies through the notion of abjection in *Bodies that Matter* but she does not explain how or why it is that, in the process of becoming, some people's bodies become one category and some another, except in as much as they relate to the heterosexual phallic symbolic order. Nor do the developments around subjection and melancholia in *The Psychic Life of Power*, appear to answer this point. It seems to me that this is a question concerning the nature of desire (and identity) that cannot be accommodated in Butler's Hegelian adaptation of desire as the desire for social regulation in order to be. This then is an issue that remains to be addressed.

### **Political Implications**

The political implications of this view of gender as an effect of melancholia and the unconscious as an effect of power are again bound up with resignifications. The point now is that identity is only achieved through constitutive exclusions and that while these operate through the psyche they are also political, involving social regulation and power. Politics therefore needs to address the issue of identification even though we can not simply discard the identities we have become: "Called by an injurious name I come into social being.

Inevitable attachment to existence leads me to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially" (Butler 1997a: 104). Or as she puts it earlier in the book "Within subjection the price of existence is subordination". The political project then involves reworking those 'injurious interpellations'. One way to do this, she suggests, is to inhabit the social categories through which we are constituted in unintended ways, and in so doing challenge and change their meaning. (She provides examples in *Excitable Speech* in the context of a discussion of the performativity of what she terms 'hate speech' and the limitations of relying on legal regulation and censorship to combat it with particular reference to racism, as well as sexism.)

Perhaps the most important point to note is that underlying all Butler's work is the view that we are in some essential - and therefore inescapable - way linguistically constituted. But at the same time we are never fully determined by the categories that constitute us. Recognising this, for Butler does not imply some sort of linguistic monism, nor does it involve some sort of nominalism. Rather for Butler it is a way of approaching the question of social change and self transformation; the way to change and transformation is through language. Since we are produced as subjects and subjected through identity categories that are social rather than 'natural' in origin change involves change at the level of the symbolic system which produces the categories and frameworks of understanding that shape our experience; that come to constitute us our bodies our identities ourselves, and constrain us. That they also never fully determine us allows the possibility for resistance, for rearticulations and hence social and self transformation. Through our bodies; ourselves.



## **The Constituted Subject and the Possibility of Agency**

To sum up then, this is an attempt to theorise subjectivity in a way that locates the formation of the subject in history and culture, rejecting the notion of the universal, transcendental subject, and avoiding gender hierarchy. It does not however involve rejecting altogether the idea of subjectivity and agency, or critique and historical change (which as some would argue are the necessary correlates of the 'death' of the universal, transcendental subject in its strong form (e.g. Benhabib 1989, 1992, 1995)). It is not merely that subjects are embedded in history and culture but rather the stronger claim that the subject is historically and culturally constituted. The "I" that is presumed originary and causal is rather an historical effect. While not being reducible to a mere linguistic product, this 'I' is as Butler puts it, nevertheless linguistically instituted. "It is not the 'I' itself that stands prior to discourse and expresses its will through it, it is rather that the discursive constitution of the "I" precedes any particular "I", as its 'transitive invocation'. 'The "I" is thus a citation of the place of the I in speech, where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates: it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak' (Butler, 1993: 226). And it is this historical revisability that provides the possibility for agency and change.

Hence to argue that subjectivity is so constituted does not entail a denial of agency or relatedly, the possibility of critique. Indeed, to reiterate an earlier point, although Butler wants to retain a notion of gender as constructed whilst rejecting the notion of a humanist

choosing subject, she also wants to reject cultural determinism and retain the notion of gender practices as sites of change, or as she herself puts it, critical agency. Nevertheless both agency and critique are clearly reconceived.

## Critique

Butler explains her position on the possibility of critique in *Feminist Contentions*, although she would not use the term itself. For her critique takes the form of re-signification and the possibility of agency stems from this. For,

[I]f the subject is a reworking of the very discursive processes by which it is worked, then 'agency' is to be found in the possibilities of resignification opened up by discourse. In this sense, discourse is the horizon of agency, but also, performativity is to be rethought as resignification.

(Butler 1995: 135)

But note her concern is with the power regimes which constitute us, the particular discourses and performative acts, the concrete conditions under which agency becomes possible. In answering Benhabib's criticisms in *Feminist Contentions* Butler makes the following point which is particularly illuminating in regard to this matter:

I would argue that there is no possibility of standing outside of the discursive conventions by which we are enabled. Gender performativity is not a question of instrumentally deploying a "masquerade," for such a construal of performativity presupposes an intentional subject behind the deed. On the contrary, gender performativity involves the difficult labour of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute



us, and which we oppose. This is, oddly enough, historical work, reworking the historicity of the signifier, and no recourse to quasi-transcendental selfhood and inflated concepts of History will help us in this most concrete and paradoxical of struggles. (Butler 1995 : 136)

According to Butler therefore, critique is immanent to particular discursive regimes and "the practice of 'critique' is implicated in the very power-relations it seeks to adjudicate" (Butler 1995: 138). The 'grounds' for critique are, she argues, better conceived as sources rather than grounds to avoid the foundationalism implied in the latter.<sup>9</sup>

### Agency

Agency then is not something that is presupposed in the structure of a prediscursive, universal self and as such prior to power and language<sup>10</sup>. In reformulating agency in terms of signification it becomes a contingent possibility that is the effect of historically specific discursive conditions and power relations.<sup>11</sup> Just as Butler's notion of performance and performativity avoids metaphysical questions about the ontological status of sexual difference because it focuses on the way that sexual difference functions as ontological difference in the contemporary epistemic/ontological regime. This view of agency does not involve metaphysical questions about the self, it rather involves an investigation of the concrete conditions under which agency becomes possible (Butler 1995). Or, as she puts it in *Gender Trouble* since "the substantive 'I' only appears through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalise its effects the

---

<sup>9</sup>The question of foundations is discussed in Butler (1992) and (1995).

question of agency is reformulated as a question of how signification and resignification work" (1990: 144).

The question of how signification and resignification work underlies all the various developments of Butler's work after *Subjects of Desire*. One aim of this is to show how it is that to be constituted by discourse is to not be determined by discourse. Already in *Gender Trouble* she argues:

[T]he subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. (Butler 1990: 145)

Moreover, she continues, "it's only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (Butler 1990: 145).

Nevertheless in *Gender Trouble* her suggestions regarding the subversion of identity are somewhat problematic (as discussed earlier in this chapter) and her notion of agency is also underdeveloped. In *Bodies That Matter* she invokes a notion of temporality in the theorisation of the performativity of gender which helps to develop these areas. Temporality involves a notion of historicity and iteration and reiteration (and citational practices) that are all subject to change and it is this that provides the possibility of agency and resistance. Moreover in *The Psychic Life of Power* she further argues on this

---

<sup>10</sup>Indeed not only has the notion of a universal self been revealed by feminist inquiry to be androcentric, it has also been shown to be ethnocentric in the seminal work of writers such as Paul Gilroy (1993).

<sup>11</sup>See Benhabib, Butler, Cornell and Fraser (1995) for an illuminating discussion of Butler's understanding of agency.



This is of course the question that ultimately dogged Foucault's work, as discussed in chapter 3. Butler tries to answer it by focusing on the psychic aspect of power, i.e. 'the regulatory formation of the psyche' (p.18). She argues that in rejecting psychoanalysis as being about repression Foucault failed to acknowledge the productive aspects of psychic regulation. It is these that she focuses on in her turn to Hegel and Althusser and the politics of subjection and melancholia. She wants to avoid the 'political fatalism' of those who would discount the possibility of agency in a constituted subject and the 'naive political optimism' (p16) of those who would cling to the classical liberal-humanist notion of subjectivity.

### **Limitations of this account**

#### **Resistance**

One problem identified in this account is Butler's tendency, at times, to associate instability with resistance as if the very fact of instability amounts to resistance in and of itself. Lois McNay, for example, argues that there is an association of the possibility for change presented by indeterminacy with "the emancipatory or political per sé"(McNay 1999: 105). Hence "Resistance becomes an inevitable consequence of instability rather than a potentiality whose realization is contingent upon a certain configuration of power relations" (McNay 1999: 106).

However I would argue that whilst this may have been true of Butler's early work, this problem has to some extent been addressed in her later work. In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* there was a tendency

to celebrate the emancipatory possibilities of the constitutive instability at the heart of heterosexuality and to associate the denaturalising of gender norms with resistance in a politics of parody and drag (whether intentionally or not,<sup>12</sup> However the emphasis on destabilising and denaturalising dominant meanings is developed in *The Psychic Life of Power* and *Excitable Speech* to include the importance of acknowledging our linguistic vulnerability and acting at that level to secure change in the categories that inaugurate us into being - as both subjects and subjected in our 'stubborn attachments' - and to inhabit those injurious categories differently.

Nevertheless this criticism highlights continuing problems: how precisely such a strategy is to be operationalised and wherein does its force lie? Inhabiting categories differently does still sound a little like a politics of drag and cross-dressing and as such may suffer from similar limitations. That is, just as drag and cross-dressing may ultimately serve rather to reinforce heterosexuality than to challenge it, reclaiming and inhabiting categories differently may well be a necessary step in destabilising dominant meanings but is not necessarily subversive of dominant meaning systems and structures of thought. And this is the problem that remains for contemporary and future political activists.

## **Biology**

Another major cause for controversy lies in the apparently cavalier dismissal of biology that this model of gender as 'enforced cultural

---

<sup>12</sup>Deutscher 1(997) argues that there is some ambivalence regarding this matter in *Gender Trouble*.



performance' appears to involve. Critics claim that her account leaves no role for biology. This is similar to the criticism of Foucault that his genealogies of sexuality and the body, although wanting to entail resistance, in fact theoretically preclude it. Dews (1987, 1992) for e.g. argues that in his rejection of a notion of a prediscursive body Foucault leaves no room for the libidinal body as a motor for change and/or resistance, while paradoxically seeming to presuppose it at times. However it is precisely this paradox that Butler aims to avoid in her notion of performativity. For Butler the site of resistance comes through the necessary repetition involved in the production of gendered identities. In particular the constitutive tenuousness (instability) at the heart of heterosexuality and the exclusions involved in the maintenance of the illusion of heterosexual coherence.

Nevertheless it could be said that rather than actually answering the question of biology - and instead insisting on a genealogy of the body's materialisation (see chapter 3) - Butler rather circumvents it. This then leaves her account open to a number of related criticisms. One such criticism is that not taking account of the biological basis of sex/gender differences neglects the systematic and structural nature of male power and domination and thereby colludes in its perpetuation and "helps men stay on top" (Ramazanoglu 1995). Another is that, despite pretensions to the contrary, Butler's account lacks a materialist analysis (e.g. Ebert 1995, Jackson 1995).

### **Materialist Feminist Critiques**

Stevi Jackson argues that Butler is following on from 1970s radical feminist critiques of men and women as social rather than biological

categories<sup>13</sup>. that take the form of class groupings, but as a 'postmodernist' she lacks their materialist analysis. Although she fails to explain what she means by postmodern, she defines a materialist analysis as one which can accommodate systematic and structural inequality. Thus she argues that Butler neglects the material and social relations which underpin the category of sex brought out in particular in the work of Guillaumin (1980) and Delphy (1984). Ultimately then Butler's materialism, albeit providing for a critical focus on social institutions and practices that regulate, constrain and produce 'us', fails in its materialist pretensions, and furthermore because of this in her account "we are left with the impression that gender is oppressive, yet not clearly hierarchical" (Jackson 1995: 17, talking about *Gender Trouble*).

Teresa Ebert (1995) also takes issue with Butler over her lack of materialism. She argues that Butler's notion of performativity neglects altogether the "dialectical relation between ideology and the economic". In divorcing heterosexuality from the material conditions of production, she argues, Butler is then able 'to substitute the symbolic regime of heterosexuality for the social formation of patriarchal capitalism (which she entirely occludes) as the determining structure constructing our lives, gender and sexuality' (Ebert 1995: 142). In other words Butler's analysis is accused of being confined to cultural and

---

<sup>13</sup>These are to be distinguished from what is popularly conceived in Anglo-American circles as 'French Feminism' Her examples are Christine Delphy, Monique Wittig, Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Collette Guillaumin who were all involved in the journal *Questions Feministes* between 1977-1988. They developed a materialist feminism which is a form of radical feminism but which takes a radically anti-essentialist position on gender and thereby rejects the celebration of feminine values usually associated with other forms of radical feminism. "The journal was dedicated to the analysis of patriarchy as a social system in which men and women constitute classes with opposing interests" Jackson, 1995, p.12).



institutional 'points of mediation' and divorced from the economic conditions that produce them.

The crucial point in both these arguments, it seems to me, concerns the understanding of 'the real', the nature of reality, the material world. For Butler the point is that the real cannot be accessed outside of cultural and linguistic frameworks which, - although purporting to reflect those material conditions whether economic, biological, psychic or whatever - in fact produce them as causes. And this point is relevant too, to another major criticism of Butler's work: that she does not pay enough attention to the material basis of gender, or that she emphasizes the symbolic at the expense of the material (e.g. Hawkesworth 1997). As Joan Scott argues in relation to Hawkesworth such a view adheres to the view that "there is a necessary opposition between the symbolic and the material, the abstract and the concrete, the individual and the social, the psychic and the institutional, the subjective and the political" (Scott 1997, p. 699). Such views miss the point about the materiality of discourses and the critique of binary oppositions.

### *You must be joking*

The crux of the disagreement lies in that these counter-arguments refuse the materiality of the signifier as an appropriate object of study and locus of change. They retain an insistence on the notion of an objective reality outside signification which, it is argued, is suppressed in deconstructive approaches. This objective reality is the (material) structural factor(s) that generate inequality e.g. biology, patriarchy and capitalism. It is this (these) that provides the grounds for political

action and, stemming from that, social change and transformation. Whereas the insights of Derrida's work highlight the materiality of the signifier and render inseparable distinctions such as meaning and being, reference and materiality. Therefore it follows that understanding the material entities that comprise social life and relations, whatever the focus, requires attention to the materiality of the signifier. The search for an objective reality outside signification is rendered futile. It is not that an objective reality outside signification is suppressed, however, it is rather that the very notion of such an objective reality is rendered untenable. Rather than accepting this and building their political practice around it, 'materialist' feminists such as Ebert argue that without the existence of such an objective reality the grounds for political action and social transformation are removed, and thus feminism as an emancipatory praxis is rendered defunct. Indeed a deconstructive approach such as Butler's is denounced by Ebert as a ludic move lacking in ethical value beyond intellectual speculation and, as such, not worthy of serious feminist contemplation.

Although I hope I have shown in various ways throughout this thesis that this latter is precisely not the case - e.g. in relation to Derrida's work in chapter 1, in relation to the feminine in Chapter 2, in relation to the materiality of the body in chapter 3 and in relation to Butler and the notion of performativity here in chapter 5- in this chapter I want to examine the basis of these counter-arguments from the 'materialist' camp in more detail, focusing on Ebert in 'Untimely Critiques for a Red Feminism' (Ebert 1995). Ebert articulates in relation to her 'Red Feminism' many of the criticisms of deconstructive approaches examined in this thesis, taking an oppositional view to my arguments



in each case: i.e. in regards to the nature of matter; reality; change and transformation; subjectivity; political adequacy. She is most strident in her criticisms of such deconstructive/poststructuralist approaches in general and she also makes a detailed and explicit argument against Butler in particular.

### *Ebert's 'Red Feminism'*

Ebert remains an old, unreconstructed historical materialist. She takes exception to discursive understandings of materialism since she "insists that the material is fundamentally tied to the economic sphere and to the relations of production, which have a historically necessary connection to all other social and cultural relations" (p.127). The economic sphere and the relations of production are separated from the discursive and the ideological which are attributed to the realm of the superstructure (and hence become 'merely cultural')

Ebert continues to use the base/superstructure model for understanding social life. She rejects altogether the attempt to avoid binaries such as material/ideal in theories such as Butler's that engage with Derrida's work or Foucault's. This she denigrates as a 'ludic' move involving the suppression of objective reality. Objective reality is "a reality independent from the consciousness of the subject and outside language and other media" (p. 113). It is the objectivity reality of surplus labour (i.e. exploitation and class struggle). Indeed this objective reality is materialism for Ebert, and it is this that produces all social differences; in which case the 'ludic' move does not so much

rethink materialism (or the materiality of matter as Butler would argue), as involve a denial of it and a reassertion of idealism.<sup>14</sup>

Any attempts at social change are doomed to failure precisely because social change requires such a view of objective reality. Without this there would be no grounds for transforming existing social relations. Indeed, since, in this view, all social differences are produced by the (objective reality of the) extraction of surplus labour, she wants to cling to the idea that the only route to change and to remedying social inequalities is through revolution (p.117).

However the difficulties with this view become clear when the following statement is considered:

Ludic theorists, in short are troping the social. In so doing they de-materialize social "realities," cutting them off from the material relations of production, and turn them into a superstructural matrix of discursive processes and semiotic, textual play of difference. (Ebert 1995 115).

This statement not only sums up Ebert's argument against so-called ludic theorists, it also demonstrates its flaws. Her argument hinges on the understanding of material realities. If material realities were to be understood in the way she suggests, this statement may be true. However the argument of this thesis is that this view of material reality as something outside signification is not sustainable. The use of tropes in the work of Derrida and Butler is not a means of de-materializing social realities. It is rather a means of examining the production of those realities, and trying to find a means to challenge

---

<sup>14</sup> Cornell, Irigaray, Cixous, Laclau, Derrida, Foucault, Ulmer and Lyotard are all cited as examples of ludic social theorists



them. For example in her account of subjection Butler's use of tropes is a means of extending Althusser's notion of 'the turn' in interpellation to show how power takes a psychic form in the inauguration of subjectivities. It is an attempt to get at the social reality of the operation of power relations and their role in the constitution of identities; how power relations operate not simply externally, on the matter of bodies for example, but how they act in the production of that matter as embodied subjectivities. This is hardly 'merely cultural' or simply superstructural. Nor is it just a matter of 'the textual play of differences' in the sense implied here of frivolity and of texts divorced from material reality. Ebert seems to be making the classic misreading of this textuality (and play), that I discuss in chapter 1. To reiterate, material reality in Derridian textuality is made up of texts; it is textually produced and has multiple determinations rather than one founding cause. Once this is accepted it becomes clear that revolutions simply do not work in the way that Ebert's historical materialism would suggest.

As for the argument that transformative politics requires an objective reality outside of signification, without which there would be no grounds for transforming existing social relations. This is related to the discussion of grounds in chapters 1 and 2, in which I follow Diane Elam (1994) to argue that although deconstruction renders such grounds illusory, it does not, at the same time, occlude the possibility of political action or even social transformation. Since the certainty provided by such grounds is removed it does, however, mean that the basis of political action - and social transformation - shifts. Political action becomes a matter of responsibility and ethical judgments rather than universal laws. A politics of absolute determinacy gives way to a politics that involves an engagement with ethics, obligations and

responsibilities. The kind of revolutionary transformation conceived in Ebert's revolutionary feminism, based on historical materialism, becomes impossibly utopian. Social transformation has multiple determinations and is not predictable in the way that Ebert would have it. Such change may be possible but what it will be like, what re-imaginings of gender, subjectivity and desire, for example, might come to be, it is just not possible to know in advance. To return to a point I made earlier, as Butler says in an interview in *Radical Philosophy* in 1994, we don't know when resistance is going to be recouped or when it will be groundbreaking. It's like breaking through to a new set of paradigms.

### *Butler*

Turning now to Ebert's critique of Butler. Butler is singled out for attention as a prime example of a ludic feminist whose pretensions to materialism simply work to occlude historical materialism, and, as such, are not a matter of materialism at all, but rather what Ebert terms 'ludic matterism'. The crux of the matter here is the issue of the relationship between the discursive and the non-discursive as Ebert herself rightly identifies. For Ebert, this remains a matter of the relationship between the base (non-discursive) and the superstructure (discursive). Not surprisingly, then, she takes issue with Butler's notion of discourse over her employment of a Derridian notion of supplementarity, (discussed in Part 1) in which the relationship between the inside and the outside becomes blurred. Since the outside to discourse, for Butler, is that which is excluded by discourse itself, materiality and signification become indissoluble and matter or materiality becomes a discursive effect, the product of signification and



power relations. For Butler this is a means of getting at the ways in which bodies are materialised and the role of signification (and heterosexism) in this. Ebert however argues that the relationship between power and materiality "becomes so circular as to border on the ludicrous" (p.139). It makes materiality a feature of the superstructure, obscuring the determining role of the economic base, blurring the relationship between the powerful and the powerless and resulting in the reassertion of the sovereign subject.

### *Reassertion of the Subject*

To take the last point first. For Ebert, Butler's materialism is not really materialism at all, hence her redescription of it as a form of "ludic matterism". This is because Ebert interprets materiality (and discourse) in Butler's work not only as simply superstructural, but as a matter of inference which, she argues, involves the reassertion of the freedom of the subject; a sovereign subject who 'invents' or creates it. Thus she declares: "It is a materialism that does not determine the non-material but is, in fact, determined by the consciousness of the subject that infers it and thus constitutes it." And also "It is the consciousness of the subject that creates (invents) this matter" (p.124-5).

However this is precisely not the case in Butler's work as I have shown. The matter of materiality is not a product of individual consciousness or inference but of the performativity of language. Language is something which precedes the individual but the meanings encoded within it work in a performative fashion to produce (materialize) and regulate embodied (matter) subjects who are

gendered, sexed, classed, raced and in many other ways subjected to social regulation, marked and classified..

Ebert also makes a similar mistake in arguing that the notion of performativity, as Butler employs it in *Bodies that Matter* , involves the reassertion of the subject. This is because she also redefines performativity as a matter of individual 'invention', at the level of consciousness, as suggested, and disputed, above. Although Ebert rightly suggests that Butler's account of performativity involves an attempt to develop constructivism to avoid cultural determinacy and reinstate agency, she misunderstands how this works. She wrongly links the notion of agency involved to that of the sovereign subject, which is clearly not the case as my discussion above demonstrates. The above discussion also makes it clear that Butler's notion of performativity does not involve the sort of voluntarism that Ebert's notion of invention would imply.

### *Power*

Turning now to the question of power. Ebert argues that the result of Butler's view power is that materiality is both relegated to the realm of the superstructure (p137-8) and becomes "an extended ideological re-mystification" (p.138). Thus:

In the name of openness, it puts forth an understanding of power as a closed, self-legitimizing operation. It completely suppresses the real material conditions of what Marx calls "the working day": the production of profit (surplus value) through the exploitation of our unpaid and subsistence labor.....This amounts to the



suppression and mystification of the materiality of materialism - of labor. (Ebert 1995 : 138)

She argues that this is a way of avoiding the consequences of the structural factors of society i.e. the relations of production. It misses the point that power is always constituted at the point of production and that "[p]ower is a binary relation between exploiter and exploited, powerful and powerless; owners of the means of prod and those who have nothing but their labour power to sell" (p.140). And that "the resolution of these binaries does not come about through linguistic resignification but through revolutionary praxis to transform the system of exploitation and emancipate those it exploits" (p.140).

However I would argue that Butler's account does not so much miss this point as recognise that power simply does not work in this way. Similarly it is not to suggest that there is no need for revolutionary praxis as to suggest that revolutions (or social change) do not work in the way suggested in Ebert's arguments. For example Ebert cites the devaluing and subsequent aborting of girl foetuses in India, due to the demand for large dowries when girls marry, to argue that "no amount of resignification in the symbolic can change what counts as a valued body, for what makes a body valuable in the world is its economic value" (p143) But this does not take account of the way that economic value is itself discursively produced; and that, in countries like India, these are heavily imbued with contemporary interpretations of religious texts. This is all part of the enforced cultural performance of sexed and gendered bodies, and works through the production of individual identities as well as economic relations. This links to the discussion of Spivak's argument concerning the effacement of the

clitoris in chapter 2. Indeed, interestingly, postcolonial theories often combine a Marxist analysis with a deconstructive approach precisely because the former alone is found wanting.

So, although Ebert concludes that Butler employs a Foucauldian notion of power that does not, indeed cannot, address the global relations and systematicity of power, both Foucault and Butler would argue that power does not have the kind of systematicity implied in this argument. There is not an identifiable base or point of origin from which power emanates. This is not to say that power relations do not operate structurally. As I pointed out in chapter 4, Foucault argues, in the *History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, that state power is only the end point of the workings of power and it is power in operation at the capillaries that needs to be the focus of attention in any attempt at social change. Most importantly for Butler, he also argued that power relations work on and through our bodies and are productive of our subjectivity. In her latest works, *The Psychic Life of Power* and *Excitable Speech*, her concern is to develop this insight further. She argues, as I have shown, that power relations do not simply act externally on our bodies or our minds as distinct from our bodies. They have a psychic aspect that works through the dual process of subjection and subjectification to produce us as individual sexed subjects/subjectivities incorporating social regulation. Social change therefore involves addressing these aspects.

This is not to deny the economic sphere any role, however. It is rather to widen the economic sphere to incorporate these aspects, as Butler herself points out in another context. In an article in *New Left Review* she addresses Marxist criticisms of her work as 'Merely Cultural' (in an



article of that name) in the context of a debate with Nancy Fraser. Butler points out that sex and sexuality are part of the social relations of production and reproduction and as such are intrinsically related to the economic sphere, as much feminist work sought to establish in the 1970s and 1980s. She emphasises that the realm of sexual production, conceived as part of the sexual division of labour, was located as part of the material conditions of life "because normative gender serves the reproduction of the heterosexually normative family (Butler 1998: 40). Contra Fraser and applicable also to Ebert's argument, her point is that struggles to transform the social field of sexuality do not become central to political economy to the extent that they can be directly tied to the question of unpaid and exploited labour, but also because they cannot be understood without an expansion of the 'economic sphere' itself to include both the reproduction of goods as well as the social reproduction of persons. (Butler 1998: 40) <sup>15</sup>

To return to my argument in chapter 2, political activism is necessary but in itself will do little to overcome gender-based inequalities whilst the category woman remains unproblematised, and questions of identity and subjectivity, i.e. gendered embodiment, are left unaddressed. Ebert's view of power as a binary relation is quite unable to address these questions.

### **Critique of Binary Oppositions**

Moving on now from materialist critiques, another set of criticisms are identified around Butler's critique of binary oppositions. This is an

---

<sup>15</sup> This point is well made by Delphy and Leonard (1992).

important element in her work. Indeed the attempt to avoid binary thinking is proving a somewhat intractable problem for many contemporary feminist theorists concerned with the body and sexual difference, and it is argued that despite an expressed attempt to avoid it Butler does not manage to do so. I will examine two such criticisms. First, the argument that employs a dualistic logic of inclusion/exclusion, domination/resistance that is inimical to a move beyond binary thinking and ultimately results in the retention of a monolithic notion of gender. Second, the claim that her account ultimately retains a representation/matter dichotomy.

McNay (1999) argues that although Butler wants to develop a dynamic and non-dichotomous model of the body and identity, in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, through an emphasis on the instability of dominant norms and the openness involved in production of identity, her account in fact continues dichotomous thinking rather than breaking with it. Thus :

This insight is undercut by the drift in her work towards reducing the process of subjectification to one of subjection. This engenders a dualistic logic of inclusion-exclusion, domination-resistance, which ultimately replicates the hyperstatization of the dominant and the fetishization of the marginal that haunts much of Foucault's work.

(McNay 1999: 99).

Furthermore, despite Butler's insights concerning the constitutive instability of heterosexuality and 'dominant norms' her concept of normative gender identity remains monolithic.



McNay argues that this results from the notion of temporality which Butler employs. She sees Butler's notion of performativity as relying "predominantly on a version of the Freudian idea of repetition compulsion and as such reactive and according to some an atemporal concept" (McNay cites Smith 1996). Thus:

This emphasis on the retrospective dimensions of time - the performative as 'a repetition, a sedimentation, a congealment of the past' (Butler, 1993:244) - leads to an overemphasis on the internal uniformity of gender norms. Reiteration become a static rather than temporal act where the reproduction of the sex/gender system involves a ceaseless reinscription of the same. This notion of time as a succession of self-identical and discrete acts renders the dominant hermetic and self-sustaining - it emphasises the uniformity of gender norms, for example - and means that disruption can only come from outside. This provokes the dualisms of subjection-resistance, exclusion-inclusion that limit Butler's work.

(McNay 1999: 102)

However in a footnote in *Bodies That Matter* Butler makes it clear that this is not the notion of temporality that she wants to employ. She explains why she would rather rely on a Derridian notion of temporality and explains the significance of this for the notion of iterability. Thus:

As a sedimented effect of reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly

defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm" (Butler 1993: 10).

Reiteration is a sedimented process but it is not, to return to a point made in chapter 4, a mechanical process. It needs to be thought in the context of Derrida's notions of the performativity of language and iterability, and of excess as in his notion of dissemination that I discussed in chapter 1, as that which cannot be captured by representation.

Indeed Derrida's notion of dissemination also helps to shed light on the second criticism in relation to binary oppositions that I want to discuss. Bray and Colebrook (1998) argue that:

Butler's challenging discursive critique of sex still posits a duality between signification and matter, where matter is seen as radically anterior. Representation would always remain in some sense a negation of matter - a break with a prior materiality, even where that materiality is an effect of representation. Instead of thinking the body and matter as already coterminous within a general discursive field, Butler's reading posits the body, or matter, as an originary effect of discursive repression. For Butler "To posit a materiality outside language is still to posit that materiality, and that materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition" (1993, 67-68)" (Bray and Colebrook 1998: 44-5).

The problem identified here is that in Butler's account the view of discourse and matter as mutually constitutive does indeed serve to *complicate* dualism. Nevertheless, since it also involves a view of representation as a negation of corporeality it can't actually *overcome*



it. However, I would argue that on closer examination it can be seen that Butler's notion of performativity involves a view of language and signification that relies on neither a representation/matter duality nor a negation of corporeality. The excess to representation that Butler conceives is better understood in terms of Derrida's notion of dissemination as something inaccessible, spilling over; some other to representation in the sense of 'more than', rather than as produced through a dichotomy between matter and representation. In terms of the body this means that it is not that there is a body that then comes to be represented but rather that we can only 'know' the body in and through the system of representation and associated norms which produce or constitutes it. It is not therefore a question of a prior body that is then negated. To make this clearer it is necessary to dwell a little longer on Butler's debt to Derrida's notion representation as about 'force and signification'.

### *Derrida and the failure of the performative*

Like Derrida, Butler does not assume a permanent structure of exclusion, or a fixed outside to signification. She rather aims to accommodate the contingent cultural and historical aspects of sexed identity with the fact that sexed identifications are also in some way compelling. That they are at once resilient yet not immutable, as I said at the start of this chapter. It is for this reason that she adds Derrida's reworking of speech act theory to the Foucauldian notion of power in her notion of the performativity of sex. Of particular concern is the connection between the norm and the failure of signification in Derrida's notion of performativity. This is because for Derrida the failure of signification is revealed to be intrinsic to the law of the

performative rather than an accidental aspect, precisely because of the incompleteness of language, as I have shown in chapter 4.<sup>16</sup>

Butler applies these insights to her concern with the compulsory character of heterosexuality. Hence, as Ziarek puts it "It is precisely because iterability fails to perpetuate the identical and pure form of the law that any identity claims have to be reinforced by exclusions - they require "a constitutive outside" (Ziarek 1997: 130). For Butler 'the constitutive outside' becomes a social abject, whose exclusion ensures the domain of social intelligibility. In this formulation, the process of exclusion performs a normative and normalizing function.

The normativity of heterosexuality thus depends on, and works through, the production of an outside to the symbolic realm. The importance of this, as Ziarek rightly suggests, is that the exclusions which constitute this excluded realm, the social abject, are thus rendered unstable, historical and contingent rather than being seen as an ahistorical Real in a Lacanian sense. That which is excluded from the symbolic is not conceived as some sort of prediscursive entity but rather "those possibilities of signification that threaten the purity and permanence of the law instituting sexual difference" (Ziarek 1997: 129).

Conceiving of these exclusions in terms of the abject in this way enables Butler to move beyond the limitations of the Lacanian notion of the symbolic and imaginary which renders sexual difference immutable. "[i]t will constitute the disruptive return of the excluded from within the very Logic of the heterosexual symbolic" (Butler 1993:

---

<sup>16</sup>Ziarek (1997) makes a similar point.



12) Indeed the chief concern of *Bodies That Matter* is to "pursue the possibility of such disruption" (Butler 1993: 12).

Furthermore, as Butler develops these insights within an explicitly Foucauldian notion of discourse and the discursive constitution of reality, the inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion dichotomies are productions within discourse. They do not involve a radically anterior corporeality that is already marked by sexual difference as in certain other feminist theories of the body. In particular those that focus on the role of body image in the institution of subjectivity and the self, in which sexual difference is deemed irreducible and therefore the effacement of women needs to be addressed through re-representing the female body in positive and autonomous ways (such as Braidotti, Grosz that I discussed in chapter 3). The exclusions, Butler emphasises, are the exclusions produced within discourse that provide the conditions of possibility for particular dominant discourses i.e. concerning intelligible bodies and abject bodies. Her account of the materialisation of bodies, it is to be recalled involves a notion of reiterated and reiterable regulatory power (in the Foucauldian sense that it is productive as well as controlling and that it works as the regulatory and normative means through which subjects are formed (Butler 1993: 22). And one of the effects of this power is the production of an outside - in this sense abjected, unintelligible bodies that serve as the constitutive conditions that secure the domain of intelligible bodies. Hence her aim in *Bodies That Matter* ,

to understand how what has been foreclosed or banished from the proper domain of 'sex' -- where that domain is secured through a heterosexualising 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. (Butler 1993: 23)

In *The Psychic Life of Power* more attention is paid to the psychic aspects of these exclusions and their role in the formation of 'stubborn attachments'.

To return to McNay's argument for a moment, when considered in these contexts it becomes clear that this is not a static model of domination or performativity. The sedimentations and congealments referred to in *Gender Trouble* and elsewhere are not passed on in a uniform manner precisely because of the failure of signification, which is also and simultaneously the failure of the performative. Moreover Butler is not presenting the possibilities for change in terms of a Foucauldian reverse discourse but rather in psychoanalytic terms of disruption or the return of the repressed, as I demonstrated in chapter 4. For Lacan what is excluded can only return at the price of psychosis, whereas in Butler's notion of performativity her understanding of the historicity of the symbolic framework and sexual difference avoids this. Therefore I would argue that the logic of inclusion/exclusion that McNay regards as a weakness in Butler's work, is rather a strength.

## **Conclusion**

Butler's notion of performativity avoids the pitfalls of feminist theories that seem to rely ultimately on an immutable notion of sexual difference as simply given and located in the body. It provides a way of understanding corporeality in its materiality as something which is



socially constituted and as such open to history and culture, and the possibility of change, whilst accepting also that in any particular embodied being there are elements of identity, however insalubrious, that become entrenched. It provides a means of recognising the bodily roots of gender identity and theorising them those as socially, rather than biologically, or psychologically given without succumbing to either cultural determinism or voluntarism. The possibility of agency, reconceived in terms of signification is retained, and with it the possibility of resistance and change. A number of problems, however remain. Although Butler's work presents a challenge to the binary code that organises the gender hierarchy, it does not provide a means to transform it. Her argument that sexual difference is but one difference among others is difficult to reconcile with feminists concerns to assert the primacy of sexual difference. Finally, the problem of how to operationalise the strategy of 'inhabiting categories differently' in such a way as to produce resistance, change and transformation beyond the level of the self, remains to be addressed.

Further to this, all of these criticisms could be linked to the criticism that Butler's view of power and materiality cannot accommodate the systematicity of power. This is a key issue and one that demands some attention. The strength of Butler's deconstructive approach, and her notion of performativity, lies in that it helps us to theorise and analyse the social constitution of the body and subjectivity as part and parcel of the same processes; and to examine the role of power and social regulation in this. Furthermore, this helps us to see that conceiving of power as a binary relation produced at the point of production, in the way that a historical materialist approach such as Ebert's would have it, is unsatisfactory; and that questions of subjectivity, identity and desire

must be addressed if change is to be forthcoming. The difficulty however, for feminist political programmes, is that precisely because of the view of power involved, Butler's account, does not, indeed cannot, tell us precisely how to effectively co-ordinate large-scale change. Her work provides insights concerning the points at which change needs to be addressed but at the same time she argues that such co-ordination can only be local and specific and accepts that any resistance may well be co-opted. However, although this does indeed remain a problem for feminist political programmes I would argue that it does not negate the utility of Butler's insights. Indeed it seems to me that precisely because her deconstructive approach allows us to see that the way that social change works is not entirely predictable in advance, it remains ever more vital for feminists aiming to facilitate such change to develop strategies drawing on these insights in a multitude of political programmes, on a multitude of sites, and thus provide the possibility of moving towards new possibilities, as yet unthought; of moving towards "revolutions that as yet have no model" (Spivak 1980). Without the benefit of these insights programmes for change that resist the materiality of the signifier and the performativity of language may well simply result in the reinstatement of the same.



## Conclusion

Taking account of gender/sexual difference as intrinsic to human being, whilst rejecting the idea that it is in any sense in and of itself originary or determining requires rethinking the whole philosophical framework within which contemporary understandings of subjectivity and the body are developed. Deconstruction, as I have presented it allows us to do that. Although Derrida himself may, in some sense, be accused of reproducing a form of 'injurious speech' in his use of metaphors of femininity and the category woman (as I have discussed in chapter 2) what he is trying to demonstrate about the undecidability of sexual difference is actually very important for women and, as I have argued, most significantly opens up the possibility for developing alternative understandings of the body. Alternative, that is, to traditional philosophical understandings of the body and to biological and/or sociobiological models. These understandings may not be commensurate with traditional theories of subjectivity, agency, identity or politics, to be sure, but they nevertheless enable the reformulation of each of these in politically useful ways. Politically useful, that is, to feminists and others, who are concerned to redress the notorious aporia around gender/sexual difference and the (female) body in traditional theory and philosophy.

The thesis began by establishing two related things. The first, in chapter 1, was that it is *not* the case that deconstructive insights involve a refusal of materiality and leave no way of dealing with reality; and as, such, are playful rather than serious and lacking in

political relevance. It is rather that Derrida's work concerning the relationship between language, 'writing' and the metaphysics of presence involves rethinking the matter of materiality and reality (in linguistic terms). It helps us to see that binary oppositions such as materiality/ideality; reference or reality/representation cannot accommodate the role of meaning and mediation in the constitution of reality - without in any sense denying the materiality of that reality. This latter is an important point and it is one to which I returned again and again in the course of this thesis.

The second, thing to be established, in Part 1, relates to the basic argument of this thesis that all of these deconstructive insights are of enormous significance for contemporary gender/body theory. It concerns one of a number of hurdles to a feminist appreciation of these insights that I identify. This is a negative response to Derrida's own use of the feminine and the category woman. In chapter 2 I set out my argument against such a negative response. Although Derrida may himself be collaborating in some form of 'injurious speech' in his use of the feminine and the category woman in the development of his arguments, I argue that this usage is not in itself inimicable to feminist concerns since it is through this that he demonstrates the undecidability of sexual difference and the category woman. At the same time he challenges the status of sexual difference as an ontological category and highlights the salience of it for the metaphysics of presence which characterises the Western philosophical tradition. All of these moves are of enormous significance for feminist attempts to rethink subjectivity as a matter of gendered embodiment.



The main purpose of establishing these two points in Part 1 was to highlight the positive implications of the radical anti-essentialism and critique of the category woman involved in deconstruction for feminist theory and practice, despite the threat this would seem to pose to women's sense of themselves as women; and at the same time to demonstrate the relevance of all this for 'real-life' women. The reason for this is that negative responses in these two areas were identified as posing two more hurdles to an appreciation of deconstructive insights. I further argued that appreciating both these points involved rethinking the materiality ideality reference/representation distinction, as introduced in chapter 1, and applying it to the problematic of gender and sexual difference. Then it becomes possible to acknowledge the materiality of language and at the same time to recognise that this is not to subscribe to some kind of nominalism or textual idealism and that deconstructive insights do have relevance for the reality of women's lives. One example of how this works was provided in relation to practices of female genital mutilation, and in particular Spivak's argument that contemporary multinational capitalism is structured by discourses on sexuality and femininity in which there is a theoretical effacement of the clitoris (and a uterine model of women) and that practices of female genital mutilation are related to this. Indeed this accusation that deconstruction cannot accommodate 'real life' women also crops up in relation to Braidotti and the body in chapter 3, and in relation to Butler's notion of performativity in chapter 5, and is similarly refuted.

Finally, as far as Part 1 is concerned, I argue, in chapter 1, that the political and ethical implications of deconstructive insights are not entirely negative. Although the universal laws that once provided

certainty are revealed to be based in a metaphysics of presence and, as such, illusory, embracing the insights of deconstruction does not involve a crippling relativism and an inability to make decisions, as the counter-argument goes. It is rather that the removal of such grounds requires a politics of undecidability in which the making of judgments and decisions involves an engagement with ethics, and becomes a matter of responsibilities and obligations. In chapter 2 I return to this argument in relation to questions of gender and sexual difference. I argue that this is a positive move in this regard. The very fact of the undecidability of the category woman provides the possibilities for change and transformation. Following Diane Elam I further argue that this provides a sort of 'groundless solidarity' around which women can be united.

In Part 2 of the thesis I develop the significance of these insights for rethinking the body and the relationship between sex, gender, subjectivity and embodiment. I argue that they provide a fruitful starting point for a theory of gendered embodiment. Bringing these insights to bear on feminist attempts to rethink the materiality of the body can help us to do so in such a way as to combat the somatophobia of much of the Western philosophical tradition and recognise the corporeal roots of (gendered) subjectivity without, however, tying bodies to their biology; and importantly without reifying sexual difference.

This latter is an important point because, although there is a certain amount of agreement that this reassertion of corporeality requires rethinking the relation between the cultural and the natural, representation and the objects of representation, reference and



materiality in order to avoid biological reductionism, one of the issues that currently divides feminist thinking in this area is the extent to which this is thought to involve some kind of reconstructive project around the bodies of women, as in the Irigarayan move. It is my contention that to follow this move and attempt to build some kind of reconstructive project around the bodies of women, as both Grosz and Braidotti do, is not the most fruitful direction in which to go. The approach that I advocate here allows us to see that although Grosz's 'volatile bodies' and Braidotti's 'nomadic bodies' do take on board some deconstructive insights, and undoubtedly provide very sophisticated accounts of the body, they both nevertheless fall prey to the dangers of reifying sexual difference because they do not take the deconstructive move far enough. Whereas, if we apply the insights of deconstruction around the indeterminacy of sexual difference to the problematic of gendered embodiment it can be seen that it is more fruitful to concentrate on rethinking the reference/materiality distinction as Butler does. Butler's move can be characterised as shifting from examining the role of culture in the construction of bodies (as in a rethinking of the sex/gender, nature/culture distinction as applied to bodies) to a focus instead on their materialization - as in the performative materialization of matter. This avoids reifying sexual difference. There is rather a focus on the political effects of grounding the category women in the materiality of bodies and posing that materiality as causal. Butler argues that one of the effects of this is the production of the duality of bodies that sustains reproductive heterosexuality as a compulsory order.

Another of the main concerns of Part 2 of this thesis has been with the notion of the body as a social construct. What does it mean to say that

the body is a social construct? How can the (incontrovertibly physical) body be a social construct? I have argued that a deconstructive approach provides valuable insights in the consideration of such questions. In particular I have argued that in questioning the reference/ meaning distinction it helps us to rethink the biology/culture distinction manifest in the sex/gender distinction as bodies (sex) and gender (culture). Again, this is not to say that bodies do not exist or are not 'real'; it is rather to shift the emphasis from bodies/biology/sex as the ground of culture to recognising the productive (or in Butler's case performative) role that culture plays in the production of matter, being, embodiment, embodied identity, existence. Only then can we begin to theorise gender. Breaking down the distinction between the material on one side and the linguistic or textual on the other is the most productive direction to go in a gender theory that seeks to rethink the sex/gender distinction to recognise the salience of the body to sexual difference whilst avoiding biological determinism. It is of particular relevance in relation to challenging the causal role that is traditionally accorded to biology in the determination of sexual difference and the gender hierarchy.

Another important issue in feminist debates around the extent to which the body can or should be perceived as a construction concerns the extent to which the body itself takes an active part in that construction.<sup>1</sup> The response to this issue marks a significant difference between deconstructive approaches such as I am advocating and others. The deconstructive insights that I have been developing suggest that there is always an excess to representation. If this is applied to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Australian feminists such as Lloyd and Gatens take this view. See the forthcoming issue of *Hypatia* on Australian philosophy.



matter of the body it would suggest that it is more fruitful to see the body as excess - something other that is not captured in conceptualisation. This is the model that Butler adopts. The advantage of this is that it enables a thoroughly social understanding of embodiment that enables the possibility of resistance to conceptualizations without rooting that resistance in biology or psychology - something we know that is knowable, and again thus avoiding the reification of sexual difference.

Indeed, Butler's concept of performativity provides a way of understanding the interimplication of the body and the social that is one of the most pressing questions in gender theory today. Her work bridges the gap between Foucault's theory of the body and feminist concerns with gendered embodiment. In developing Foucault's understanding of the body as a social construct, product of disciplinary power, in the context of Derridian insights concerning iterability and citationality, her work moves beyond the theoretical impasses of Foucault's own work to develop a theory of a socially constituted body (or gendered embodiment) that can accommodate a notion of resistance and change, albeit not freedom and liberation, as I argued in chapter 4. An important aspect of Butler's notion of performativity that is the focus of chapter 5 is that it provides an example of a deconstructive approach that allows an account of the psyche without having to make reference to an originary set of mechanisms. It can take embodiment seriously without having to return to biology as a given. Moreover it also allows for the possibility of innovation and change whilst simultaneously accounting for the degree of stability that our identity categories appear to have. It therefore succeeds in avoiding both determinism and voluntarism.

The issue of materialism crops up in a number of places. Sometimes there has been an elision between the terms materialism, materiality and matter. This is not a result of careless slippage. It is the result of the rethinking of the matter of materiality and, *mutatis mutandis*, materialism, through the lens of a deconstructive approach. This too has been a very important theme throughout this thesis as it is the crux of a number of debates both within feminism and between feminists and deconstruction. The key questions concern the relationship between the material and the ideal, reference or materiality and representation, and discourse and not discourse. In particular, whether the blurring of the boundaries between these two apparently discrete elements in this rethinking involves: a form of frivolous idealism; a denial of the real; an inability to accommodate the real conditions of women's lives; political inadequacy; a lack of intellectual integrity; a (laughable) linguistic reductionism. These are issues that permeate all the chapters of this thesis and they are all criticisms that I have examined and found wanting. To reiterate once again, although a deconstructive approach does indeed involve a linguistic interpretation of the constitution of social life, and bodies, as I have argued, this does not involve the mere reduction of 'things' to 'words' or a denial of the 'real'. Indeed the main strengths of this approach lie in that the attempt to accommodate the relation between the social, the material and language or signification, without reducing things to words and without indicating a form of linguistic monism or cultural determinism. And, at the same time not succumbing to either some sort of cultural pessimism or the sort of naive cultural optimism an insistence on the free play of meaning can suggest (as in Rorty's simple



redescriptions in the conversations of man(sic)kind that I discussed in chapter 1).

It also avoids the simplification of the notion of power and structures that continues to limit the rising number of feminists who, refusing deconstructive insights, reject the materiality of the signifier as the focus of analysis and route to change, and debunking Butler's materialist pretensions, regard themselves as the real materialists. For example, a key element in the rejection of the material relevance of a deconstructive approach is the neglect of material and institutional power structures entailed in a linguistic focus. However, as I have argued in relation to Butler, in chapter 5, it is not that her account fails to incorporate these structures because her analysis rests on the performativity of language. It is rather that it shows how it is that material and institutional structures of power must be addressed and challenged linguistically precisely because of the performativity of language.

Another strength of Butler's deconstructive approach and her notion of performativity, lies in that it helps us to theorise and analyse the social constitution of the body and subjectivity as part and parcel of the same processes; and to examine the role of power and social regulation in this. Furthermore, this helps us to see that conceiving of power as a binary relation produced at the point of production, in the way that a historical materialist approach such as Ebert's would have it, is unsatisfactory; and that questions of subjectivity, identity and desire which cannot be accommodated in such an account, must be addressed if change is to be forthcoming.

There is however, one area that remains to be developed in Butler's account. This concerns the issue of desire. The problem is that if we accept the notion of desire as a performative effect, how do we then account for the variation in individual desires as reflected in identity categories which, as Butler has established, are clearly not voluntary? Why is it that if certain desires are foreclosed in the heterosexual matrix, some bodies resist this foreclosure and some bodies do not? Butler explains the performative production of intelligible and unintelligible bodies through the notion of the abject in *Bodies that Matter*, but she does not explain how or why it is that, in the process of becoming, some people's bodies become one category and some another, except in as much as they relate to the heterosexual symbolic order. This seems to me to be a question concerning the origins of desire that has not been accommodated in her account of melancholic incorporation or, in her adaptation of Hegelian desire as the desire for social regulation, in her most recent work. This is not to suggest that this difficulty renders her account of performativity invalid, however. It is rather to highlight it as an issue that remains to be addressed.

A further difficulty for feminist political programmes stems from the view of power and, relatedly, social change and transformation, involved in Butler's account. Precisely because of her view of power she is unable to pinpoint how to effectively co-ordinate large-scale change. Her work provides insights concerning the points at which change needs to be addressed but at the same time suggests that such co-ordination can only be local and specific and accepts that any resistance may well be co-opted. However, although this does indeed remain a problem for feminist political programmes, again I would argue that it does not negate the utility of Butler's insights, any more



that it negates the utility of the rest of the deconstructive insights that I have been discussing. Indeed, it seems to me, precisely because her deconstructive approach allows us to see that the way that social change works is not entirely predictable in advance, it remains ever more vital for feminists aiming to facilitate such change to develop strategies drawing on these insights in a multitude of political programmes, on a multitude of sites, and thus provide the possibility of moving towards new possibilities, as yet unthought as I argue in chapter 5. Without the benefit of these insights programmes for change that resist the materiality of the signifier and the performativity of language may well simply result in the reinstatement of the same.

## Comprehensive Bibliography

- Alcoff, Linda (1988) 'Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory', *Signs*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 405-36.
- Armstrong, David (1987) 'Bodies of Knowledge: Foucault and the Problem of Human Anatomy' in Scrambler, G (ed) *Sociological Theory and Medical Sociology*, London: Tavistock.
- Austin, J. L (1961) *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1962) *How To Do Things with Words*, ed J. O. Urmson, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee (1988) 'Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power' in Irene Diamond and Lee Quimby (eds) *Feminism and Foucault*, Boston: North Eastern University Press.
- Bartowski, Frances (1980) 'Feminism and Deconstruction: "a union forever deferred"', *Enclitic*, Vol. 4 pp. 70 - 77.
- Benhabib, Seyla and Cornell, Drucilla (eds) (1987) *Feminism as Critique: Essays on the Politics of Gender in Late Capitalist Societies*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Benhabib, Seyla (1992) *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism*, London: Polity Press.
- Benhabib, Seyla, Butler, Judith, Cornell, Drucilla and Fraser, Nancy (1995) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, with an introduction by Linda Nicholson, New York and London: Routledge.



- Bennett, Paula, (1993) 'Critical Clitoridectomy: Female Sexual Imagery and Psychoanalytic Theory', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 18, no 2, pp. 7-31.
- Bernstein, Richard J. (1983) *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Bernstein, Richard J. (1991) *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Bordo, Susan, (1988) 'Feminist scepticism and the "maleness" of philosophy', *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol .85, No. 11, pp. 619-29.
- Bouchard, Donald (ed) (1977)*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Boyne, Roy (1990) *Foucault and Derrida: The Other side of Reason*, London: Unwin Hyman.
- Braidotti, Rosi (1989) 'The Politics of Ontological Difference' in Teresa Brennan, (ed) *Between Feiminism and Psychoanalysis*, New York and London: Routlege.
- Braidotti, Rosi (1991) *Patterns of Dissonance; A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, trans. Elizabeth Guild, Oxford; Polity Press.
- Braidotti, Rosi (1994) *Nomadic Subjects; Embodiment and Sexual Difference* , New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bray, Abigail and Colebrok, Claire (1998) 'The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics of (Dis)Embodiment', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp.35-67.
- Brennan, Teresa, (ed) (1989)*Between Feiminism and Psychoanalysis*, New York and London: Routlege.

- Butler, Judith, (1987) *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Butler , Judith (1987b) Variations on Sex and Gender (1987) in Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (eds) *Feminism as Critique: Essays on the Politics of Gender in Late Capitalist Societies*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Butler, Judith (1988) 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 pp. 519-31.
- Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1991) 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' in Diana Fuss (ed) *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1992a) 'The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler', *Artforum*, November, pp. 82-89.
- Butler, Judith (1992b) 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"' in Butler, in Judith Butler and Joan Scott (eds) *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1992c) 'Response to Susan Bordo "Feminist Scepticism and the "Maleness "of Philosophy', *Hypatia*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 162-5.
- Butler, Judith, (1992d) 'Sexual Inversions' in Domna Stanton (ed) *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to Aids*, Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press.
- Butler, Judith (1993a) *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler (1993b) 'Poststructuralism and Postmarxism', *Diacritics*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp.3-11.



- Butler, Judith (1994a) *Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler* *Radical Philosophy*. 67, Summer, pp. 32-39.
- Butler, Judith (1994b) 'Against Proper Objects', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol 6, No. 2 and 3, pp.1-26.
- Butler, Judith (1995) 'For a Careful Reading' in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1997) *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, Judith (1998) 'Merely Cultural', *New Left Review*, 227 Jan/Feb, pp. 33-44.
- Butler, Judith and Scott, Joan (eds) (1992), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Cadava, Eduardo, Connor, Peter and Nancy, Jean-Luc (eds) (1991) *Who Comes After the Subject*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Caputo, John D. (1997) 'Dreaming of the Innumerable: Derrida, Drucilla Cornell and the Dance of Gender' in Ellen K. Feder, Mary Rawlinson, and Emily Zakin, *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman*, Routledge: London and New York.
- Cascardi, Anthony J. (1992) *The Subject of Modernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cornell, Drucilla (1991) *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Cornell, Drucilla (1992) *The Philosophy of the Limit*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Cornell, Drucilla (1992b) 'The Philosophy of the Limit: Systems Theory and Feminist Legal Reform' in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld,

- and David Gray Carlson, (eds) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Cornell, Drucilla (1993) *Transformations: Recollective Imagination and Sexual Difference*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Cornell, Drucilla, Rosenfeld, Michel and Carlson, David Gray (eds) (1992) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Critchley, Simon (1992) *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Critchley, Simon, Derrida, Jacques, Laclau Ernesto, and Richard Rorty Richard (eds) (1996), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, edited by Chantal Mouffe, Routledge: London and New York.
- Culler, Jonathan (1982) *On Deconstruction*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- De Lauretis, Teresa (ed) (1986) 'Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts' in *Feminist Studies: Critical Studies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- De Lauretis, (1987) *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, London: Macmillan.
- De Lauretis, Teresa (1990) 'Upping the Anti (sic) in Feminist Theory' in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (eds) *Conflicts in Feminism*, New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1988) *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand, London: Athlone Press. Trans. (First published in French 1986 by Les Editions Minuit)
- Delphy, Christine and Leonard, Diana (1992) *Familiar Exploitation*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Denzin, Norman (1994) "Postmodernism and Deconstructionism" in David R Dickens and Andrea Fontana (eds) *Postmodernism and Social Inquiry*, London: UCL Press.



- Derrida, Jacques (1973) *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison, Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (First published as *La Voix et le phénomène*, 1967, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).
- Derrida, Jacques (1974) *Of Grammatology*, trans. and preface, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press. (First published as *De la Grammatologie*, 1967, Paris; Editions de Minuits).
- Derrida, Jacques (1978a) *Writing and Difference*, trans. and introduction Alan Bass, London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul. (First published as *L'Écriture et la différence*, 1967, Paris: Seuil).
- Derrida, Jacques (1979) *Spurs/Eperons*, French-English version, trans. Barbara Harlow, London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1981) *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Athlone. (First published as *Positions*, 1972 Paris: Editions de Minuit).
- Derrida, Jacques (1982a) *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf. (First published as *Marges de la philosophie*, 1972, Paris: Editions Minuit).
- Derrida Jacques (1982b) 'Sending: On Representation', trans. Peter and Mary Ann Caws, *Social Research*, Vol 49, no. 2, pp. 294-326.
- Derrida, Jacques (1983) 'Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference', *Research in Phenomenology* 13, pp. 65-83.
- Derrida, Jacques, (1984) *Signéponge/Signsponge*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1985a) *The Ear of The Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, edited by Christie MacDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf, French edition edited by Claude Levesque and Christie MacDonald, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

- Derrida, Jacques, (1985b) 'Deconstruction in America: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' (with James Creech, Peggy Kamuf and Jane Todd), *Critical Exchange*, Vol. 17, Winter, pp.1-33.
- Derrida, Jacques (1985c) 'Racism's Last Word', trans. Peggy Kamuff, *Critical Inquiry* 12, pp. 290-9.
- Derrida, Jacques (1986a) 'But beyond...(Open Letter to Anne Clintock and Rob Nixon)', *Critical Inquiry*, no.13, Autumn, pp. 140-170.
- Derrida, Jacques (1986b) *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand, Lincoln and London:University of Nebrasks Press. (First published as *Glas*, 1974, Editions Galilée).
- Derrida, Jacques (1987a) 'Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida' in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds.) *Men in Feminism*. New York and London: Methuen.
- Derrida, Jacques (1987b) *The Truth in Painting*, , trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago and London. (First published as *La Verité en Peinture*, 1978, Paris: Flammarion).
- Derrida, Jacques (1987c) *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass. (First published as *La Carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà*, 1980, Paris: Flammarion).
- Derrida, Jacques (1988a) *Limited Inc*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1988b) 'Limited Inc a, b, c...', trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc*, Evanstan, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp. 29-110.
- Derrida, Jacques (1988c) 'Signature, Event, Context', trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc*, Evanstan, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp. 1-27.
- Derrida, Jacques (1988d) 'The Politics of Friendship', *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 11, pp. 632-648.



- Derrida, Jacques (1989) 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other' in Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (eds) *Reading De Man Reading*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, Jacques, (1993) *Dissemination*, trans. with an Introduction and Additional Notes by Barbara Johnson, London: Athlone. (First published as *La Dissemination*, 1972, Paris: Editions du Seuil)
- Derrida, Jacques (1991) "Eating Well," or the Calculation of the Subject', trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell, in Elisabeth Weber (ed) *Points: Interviews, 1974-1994, Jacques Derrida*, California: Stanford University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1992) 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', translated by Mary Quaintance, in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, London and New York: Routledge. (First given at a symposium entitled 'Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice' at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Oct 1-2 1989 and published in vol 11 Cardozo Law Review, vol 11 pp. 919-1726).
- Derrida, Jacques (1992b) 'The Other Heading: Memories, Responses and Responsibilities' in *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Micheal B. Naas, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1995) *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London. (First published as 'Donner la mort' in *L'éthique du don, Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don*, 1992, Paris: Métailié-Transition).
- Derrida, Jacques (1996) 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism' in Mouffe, Chantal (ed) *Deconstruction and Pragmatism::* Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida. Ernesto Laclau and Richard Rorty, London and New York: Routledge.

- Derrida, Jacques and Macdonald, Christie (1982) 'Choreographies', *Diacritics*, Vol. 12, summer, pp. 66-76.
- Descombes, Vincent (1980) *Modern French Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deutscher, Penelope (1997) *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Dews, Peter, (1987) *Logics of Disintegration*, New York and London: Verso.
- Diamond, Irene and Quimby, Lee (eds) *Feminism and Foucault*, Boston: North Eastern University Press.
- Dickens, David R. and Fontana, Andrea (1994) *Postmodernism and Social Inquiry*, London: UCL Press.
- Diprose, Rosalyn (1994) *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*, London and New York Routledge.
- Diprose, Rosalyn and Ferrell Robyn (eds) (1991) *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Dreyfus, Hubert and Rabinow, Paul (1982) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, with an 'Afterword: The Subject and Power' by Michel Foucault, Brighton: Harvester.
- Dronsfield, Jonathon and Midgley, Nick (eds) (1997) *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, Warwick: *PLI - Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, University of Warwick.
- Eagleton, Terry (1983) *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ebert, Teresa L. (1995) '(Untimely) Critiques for a Red Feminism', *Transformation, Spring, Post-Ality: Marxism and Postmodernism*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 113-149.



- Elam, Diane (1990) 'Ms. en Abyrne: Deconstruction and Feminism', *Social Epistemology*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 293-308.
- Elam, Diane (1994) *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyrne*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Epstein, Steven (1996) 'A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality' in Steven Seidman (ed) *QueerTheory/Sociology*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Esterberg, Kristin G. (1996) '"A Certain Swagger When I Walk": Performing Lesbian Identity' in Steven Seidman (ed) *QueerTheory/Sociology*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Featherstone, Mike (1992) 'Postmodernism and the Aestheticism of Everyday Life' in S. Lash and J. Friedman (eds) *Modernity and Identity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Feder, Ellen K., Rawlinson, Mary and Zakin, Emily (eds) (1997) *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Felman, Shoshana (1987) *Jaques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight:: Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Ferrell, Robyn (1991a) 'Richard Rorty and the Poet's Utopia' in Diprose, Rosalyn and Ferrell, Robyn (eds) *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Ferguson, Kathy E. (1993) *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory*, Oxford: University of California Press.
- Ferrell, Robyn, (1991b) 'The Passion of the Signifier and the Body in Theory', *Hypatia*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Fall, pp. 172-184.
- Ferrell, Robyn (1993) 'Why bother? Defending Derrida and the significance of writing', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 1, No. 2 June, pp. 121-31.

- Flax, Jane 'Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory' in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/ Postmodernism*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Forrester, John (1990) *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1970) *The Order of Things*, London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, Michel (1977a) *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. A . Sheridan, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel (1977b) 'A Preface to Transgression' in Donald Bouchard (ed) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1977c) 'Language to Infinity' in Donald Bouchard (ed) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1977d) 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' in Donald Bouchard (ed) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1977e) 'What Is an Author?' in Donald Bouchard (ed) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Harmondsworth: Penguin. (First published as *L'histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976).



- Foucault, Michel (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972 - 1977*, edited by Colon Gordon, trans Cloin Gordon, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Foucault, Michel (1982) 'The Subject and Power' an afterword to Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Brighton: Harvester.
- Foucault, Michel (1984b) 'Truth and Power' in Paul Rabinow (ed) *The Foucault Reader*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel (1984c) What is Enlightenment? in Paul Rabinow (ed) *The Foucault Reader*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel (1985) *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2*, trans. Robert Hurley, Harmondsworth Penguin. First published as *L'histoire de la sexualité: L'usage des plaisirs*, 1984, Paris: Gallimard).
- Foucault, Michel (1986) *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume 3*, trans. Robert Hurley, Harmondsworth: Penguin. (First published as '*L'histoire de la sexualité: Le souci de soi*, 1984, Paris: Gallimard).
- Foucault, Michel (1988) *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kirtzman London: Routledge.
- Fraser, Nancy (1989) 'The New French Derrideans' in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, Oxford: Polity.
- Game, Ann (1992) *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gasché, Rodolphe (1986) *The Tain of the Mirror*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.

- Gasché, Rodolphe, (1994) *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.
- Game, Ann (1991) *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gatens, Moira (1996) *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics Power and Corporeality*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Giddens, Anthony (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gilroy, Paul, (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, New York and London: Verso.
- Grosz Elizabeth (ed)(1991) *Hypatia* Special Issue 'Feminism and the Body' Vol 6, No 3, Fall.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1994a) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1994b) 'Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism' in Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (eds) *The Essential Difference*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1996) *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Gutting, Gary (ed) (1984) *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.
- Habermas, Jurgen (1987) *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Hartsock, Nancy (1990) 'Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?' in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge: New: York and London.



- Harvey, Irene E.(1986) *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*,  
Bloomington; University of Indiana Press.
- Hawkesworth, Mary (1997) 'Confounding Gender', *Signs*, Vol 22, no. 3  
pp 649-685.
- Hekman, Susan (1990) *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a  
Postmodern Feminism*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Hennesey, Rosemary (1993) *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of  
Discourse*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Hoar, Michel (1982) 'The Play of Nietzsche in Derrida' in David Wood  
(ed) *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hobson, Marian (1987) 'History Traces' in David Attridge, Geoffrey  
Bennington and Robert Young (eds.), *Post-Structuralism and  
the Question of Theory*, Cambridge Mass.: Cambridge University  
Press.
- Holland, Nancy (1985) 'Heidegger and Derrida Redux; A Close Reading'  
in H. J. Silverman and D. Ihde (eds) *Hermeneutics and  
Deconstruction*, New York; State University of New York Press.
- Howells, Christina (1999) *Derrida: Deconstruction from  
Phenomenology to Ethics*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hoy, David (ed) (1986) *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, London; Basil  
Blackwell.
- Jackson, Stevi (1995) 'Gender and Heterosexuality: A Materialist  
Feminist Analysis' in Mary Maynard and June Purvis (eds)  
(*Hetero*)*Sexual Politics*, London: Taylor and Francis.
- Jardine, Alice, A. (1985) *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and  
Modernity*, Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press.
- Jardine, Alice and Smith, Paul (1987) *Men in Feminism*, London and  
New York.

- Johnson, Barbara (1977) 'The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida', *Yale French Studies*, 55/6, double issue, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*.
- Johnson, Christopher (1993) *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kamuff, Peggy (ed) (1991) *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Kaplan, Ann (1992) Review of *Gender Trouble*, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 343-48.
- Kearney, Richard (1984) *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kellner, Douglas (1988) 'Postmodernism as Social Theory: Some Challenges and Problems'. *Theory, Culture and Society* 5, pp.239-
- Koestenbaum, Wayne (1991) 'The Queen's Throat: (Homo)sexuality and the Art of Singing' in Diana Fuss (ed) *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, New York and London Routledge.
- Kirby, Vicki (1987) 'On the cutting edge: feminism and clitoridectomy' *Australian Feminist Studies* 5, Summer, pp.35-55.
- Kirby, Vicki (1991) 'Corpus delicti: the body at the scene of writing', in Rosalyn Diprose and Robyn Ferrell (eds) *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, pp. 88-100.
- Kirby, Vicky (1997) *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Krupnick, Mark (1983) *Displacement, Derrida and After*, Bloomington: Indiana Press.



- Lloyd, Genevieve (1990) 'Maleness, Metaphor and the "Crisis" of Reason' in Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (eds.), *A Mind of One's Own*, Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press.
- Lloyd, Moya (1998) 'Politics and Melancholia', *Women's Philosophy Review*, No. 20, Winter 98/99, pp. 25-43.
- Marcus, Sharon, (1992) 'Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape' in Judith Butler and Joan Scott (eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York and London: Routledge.
- McIntosh, Mary (1968) 'The Homosexual Role', *Social Problems*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 189-92.
- McNay, Lois (1992) *Foucault and Feminism*, Cambridge; Polity Press.
- McNay, Lois (1994) *Foucault*, London: Polity Press.
- McNay, Lois (1999) 'Gender, Habitus and the Field: Pierre Bordieu and the Limits of Reflexivity', *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 95-117.
- Merquior, J. G. (1985) *Foucault*, London: Fontana.
- Mouffe, Chantal (ed) (1996) *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*:: Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida. Ernesto Laclau and Richard Rorty, London and New York: Routledge.
- Namaste, Ki (1996) 'The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality' in Steven Seidman, (ed) *Queer Theory/Sociology*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nicholson, Linda and Seidman, Steven (eds.) (1995) *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, Christopher (1985) *The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory after Deconstruction*., London and New York: Methuen.
- Norris, Christopher (1987) *Derrida*, London: Fontana.

- Norris, Christopher (1990) *What's Wrong With Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Norris, Christopher (1991) *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory*, with an introduction by Michael Payne, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Oliver, Kelly (1995) *Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy's Relation to the "Feminine"*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Osborne, Peter and Segal, Lynne (1994) 'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler'. *Radical Philosophy* 67, Summer, pp.32-39.
- Oudshoorn, Nelly (1994) *Beyond the Natural Body, An Archaeology of Sex Hormones*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Parker, Andrew and Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (eds) (1995) *Performativity and Performance*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Phillips, Adam (1997) 'Keeping It Moving' Commentary on Judith Butler, by Adam Phillips' in Judith Butler *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Californian: Stanford University Press.
- Plummer, Ken (1975) *Sexual Stigma*, London: Routledge.
- Quine, Willard V. (1969) *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia University Press.
- Rabinow, Paul (ed) (1994) *The Foucault Reader; An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, Harmondsworth Penguin.
- Rajchman, John (1985) *The Freedom of Philosophy*, New York:: Columbia University Press.



- Ramazanoglu, Caroline (ed) (1993) *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some Tensions between Foucault: and Feminism*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Ramazanoglu, Caroline (1995) 'Back to Basics: Heterosexuality, Biology and Why Men Stay on Top' in Mary Maynard and June Purvis (eds) *(Hetero)sexual Politics*, London: Taylor and Francis.
- Rorty, Richard (1986) 'Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth', in Ernst Leopre (ed) *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, , Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Rorty, Richard (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard (1991) *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard (1991) *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume 2*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, Jacqueline (1986) *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London: Verso.
- Ryan, Michael (1982) Deconstruction and Social Theory: The Case of Liberalism` in Mark Krupnick (ed), *Displcaement Derrida and After*, Bloomington: Indiana Press, pp.154-168.
- Sawicki, Jana (1991) *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism Power and the Body*, New York and London Routledge.
- Sawicki, Jana (1994) 'Foucault, Feminism and Questions of Identity' in Gary Gutting (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.
- Scholes, Robert (1994) 'Éperon Strings' in Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (eds) *The Essential Difference*, Bloomington and Indinapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Schor, Naomi (1989) 'This Essentialism Which is Not One' *differences*, Vo. 1, No. 2 Summer.

- Schor, Naomi and Weed, Elizabeth (eds) (1994) *The Essential Difference*,  
Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Searle, John (1977) 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida',  
*Glyph*, No 1, Vol 1.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet*,  
Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Seidman, Steven (ed) (1996) *Queer Theory/Sociology*, Oxford:  
Blackwell.
- Sheldrick, Magrit (1997) *Leaky Bodies: Feminism, postmodernism and  
(bio)ethics*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Singer, Linda (1993) *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in the  
Age of Epidemic*, New York and London: Routledge, edited and  
introduced by Judith Butler and Maureen Mac Grogan.
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. (1988) *Inessential Woman: Problems of  
Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, Boston: Beacon.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, (1980) 'Revolutions that as yet have no  
Model: Derrida's *Limited Inc*', *diacritics*, Vol 10, December, pp.29-49.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1983) 'Displacement and the Discourse of  
Woman' in Mark Krupnick (ed) *Displacement: Derrida and After*,  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1984) 'Love me, love my *ombre, elle*',  
*Diacritics*, 14/4 , Winter, pp. 19-36.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1987) *In Other Worlds*, New York;  
Methuen.
- Spivak. Gayatri Chakravorty (1989) 'Feminism and Deconstruction  
Again: Negotiating with Unacknowledged Masculinism' in Teresa  
Brennan (ed.) *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, London and  
New York: Routledge.



- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorti (1990) *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, eSarah Harasym New York and London: Routledge.
- Staten, Henry (1984) *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Tyler, Carole-Anne (1991) 'Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag' in Diana Fuss (ed) *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Weedon, Chris (1987, 1997) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Weeks, Jeffrey (1977) *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, London: Quartet.
- Weston, Kath (1993) 'Do Clothes Make the Woman: Gender Performance Theory and Lesbian Eroticism' *Genders* 17, pp. 1-21.
- Whitford, Margaret (1991) *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Whittle, Stephen (1996) "Gender Fucking or Fucking Gender? Current Cultural Contributions to Theories of Gender Blending." In *Blending Genders*, Richard. Ekins and Dave . King (eds) London and New York: Routledge.
- Wilkinson, Sue and Kitzinger, Celia (eds) (1993) *Heterosexuality: A Feminism and Psychology Reader*, London: Sage.
- Wood, David (1987) 'Beyond Deconstruction?' in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed), *Contemporary French Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, David (ed.) (1988) *Derrida and Différance*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (First published 1985, Parousia Press, Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick).
- Wood, David (1992) *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell.

- Woodiwiss, Anthony (1990) *Social Theory After Postmodernism: Rethinking Production Law and Class*, London: Pluto Press.
- Ziarek, Ewa Plonowsk (1997) 'Performativity and the Deconstruction of Sexual Difference' in Ellen K. Feder, Mary Rawlinson and Emily Zakin (eds) *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman,,* London and New York: Routledge.