Gender Undone: Subversion, Regulation and Embodiment in the work of Judith Butler


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Abstract: Judith Butler’s philosophical writings on identity have provided inspiring, if occasionally ‘troubling’ ways of rethinking gender. A key contribution has been the challenge to conventional social constructionist ideas and thinking on subjectivity. In developing a paradigm of performativity Butler’s work takes us beyond the territory of identity secured in much previous feminist poststructuralist debate. She does so in part by providing an ontological critique – a type of ‘queering’ if you will – of such seemingly knowable categories as ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘girl’ or ‘boy’. In addressing the radical interruption in identity theorizing offered in Butler’s writing, we consider the arresting claim that identity is a type of ‘doing’ that is only made manifest at the point of action. To explore the theoretical, empirical and political issues at stake we draw especially upon Butler’s writings on identity and ally this to some of our own ethnographic research on gender, youth and schooling. Here, we explore young people’s compulsion to enact and display stylized forms of gender embodiment, and the spectacular enactments of transgression that can elicit a practice of gender dissimulation. Our focus is upon the subversion, regulation and embodiment of gender identities and its implications for the sociology of education.
Introduction

The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated – Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990, p.148).

One of the most important debates in the social sciences in recent years has concerned the thorny question of identity (Rutherford, 1990; Du Gay, Evans and Redman, 2000). In the political arena many feminist, religious, environmental and race-conscious groups have chosen to deploy identity as a founding principle upon which to mobilise, raise group consciousness and institute policies on human rights, citizenship, equal pay and social justice. In academia the issue of identity has been pivotal in facilitating new clusters of knowledge not least through critical engagements with postcolonial theory, feminist theory and post-Marxist reformulations of social class. This work has seen the ‘margins’ beat a path to the ‘centre’ and usher in new experiences from hitherto silenced voices. It is within this context that assertive attempts to reclaim and celebrate displaced identities have come to the fore. This has seen the status of identity opened up to spatial and temporal mutability, plurality and fragmentation, social and psychic manifestation, and the bounded politics of inclusion and exclusion.

However, alongside the renewed interest in identity has developed a more critical and radical approach to this seemingly known and knowable social category. It is here that Judith Butler’s writing has been remarkably influential, challenging the very
ontological status of identity itself. In so doing, her ideas have inspired a new
generation of Queer Theorists and gender scholars, while at same time causing
consternation amongst some feminists and gay and lesbian activists. Most disturbing
for this latter group has been Butler’s insistence on the impossibility of sexed
identities and the recognition that ‘gender norms are finally phantasmic, impossible to
embody’ (1990:141). In the field of gender research this has created a split between
those who continue to operate through Identity Politics and those who strive to work
against it. At present very few scholars within the sociology of education are writing
against identity, with much work unwittingly enforcing sex categories as an
incontrovertible truth. Through an engagement with Butler’s anti-humanist approach
to the subject we aim to dislodge these certainties by troubling gender categories and
disclosing the fundamental impossibility of sex identities. Our focus is upon
classroom cultures and three interrelated strands of gender identity: subversion,
regulation and embodiment.

Subversion

In her path-breaking book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,
Judith Butler (1990) provides a thorough ontological critique of subjecthood. As the
subtitle suggests, Butler is driven by a radical impulse, not only to complicate and
multiply identity formations by recognising difference across time and space – a key
feature of many feminist poststructuralist accounts – but, above all, to subvert and
implode the very basis of identity itself. This involves much more than the
deconstruction of gender into its socially constitutive parts as either masculine or
feminine. It entails the stark recognition that the seemingly knowable sex categories of ‘male’ or ‘female’ are themselves fundamentally unstable discursive productions that in effect serve to make masculinity and femininity intelligible.

By uncoupling sex/gender categories Butler disrupts any notion of an ontological subject that prefigures action. Consider, for example, the seemingly straightforward act of a girl putting on lipstick. Rather than attribute this action to a knowable female subject, in *Bodies that Matter* Butler describes such activities as a mode of ‘girling’ (1994:7) through which the ‘subject’ is only made intelligible through action. ‘My argument’, she recounts, ‘is that there need not be a “doer behind the deed”, but that the “doer” is variably constructed in and through the deed’ (1990:142). In contrast to the notion of a subject (the girl) producing action (putting on lipstick), Butler suggests that it is the action that produces the subject, or at least the semblance of what the subject, the girl, ‘is’. To this extent, ‘There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (p.25). In this regard Butler’s work provides a provocative and compelling *anti-foundationalist* critique of identity; a critique that has divided some feminist scholars while at the same time enabling new positions to emerge across the landscape of Queer Theory and gender politics.

But if there is something profoundly ‘troubling’ for feminism about the negation of a female subject, its antidote lies, perhaps, in the subversion and dramatic proliferation of identity possibilities. What happens, we may wonder, to our notions of gender if the lipstick the girl in our example puts on is black and used to exhibit an alternative Goth-girl identity; if she is what the media term, a ‘lipstick lesbian’; or if the ‘girl’ is
really a boy? Here, the incitement of normative gender behaviour and sexual codes of practice gives rise to an irrepressible proliferation of ‘Other’ sex/gender possibilities – the tomboy, the lesbian, the drag queen and so on. In these instances ‘genders can be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible’ (p.141). These new discursive positions are not set apart from a rigidly circumscribed heterosexual femininity but are central to its constitution as they are produced, in effect, through the deployment of these norms. As Foucault, a figurative influence on Butler’s writings on sexuality reveals, ‘Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’, but instead, ‘depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance’ (1978:95).

An example of the ways in which Foucault’s ‘power network’ (1978:95) can enunciate new points of resistance has been apparent in our ethnographic research on gender, sexuality and schooling\(^1\) (Kehily & Nayak, 1996; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Kehily & Nayak 1997; Kehily, 2002). We discovered that sexual jibes, stories and name-calling were an intimate part of student cultures arguing that this discursive production of sexuality came to form an *organising principle* in peer-group relations in school. These tropes of sexual imagining defined the ‘appropriate’ from the ‘inappropriate’, the ‘normal’ from the ‘deviant’, the ‘moral’ from the ‘immoral’. In so doing, they produced complex and dynamic heterosexual hierarchies in which the lives of subordinate males, girls and young women were most open to sexual scrutiny especially from more dominant male students. Yet as the following school-based discussion with white, working-class girls, aged 14-15 years reveals, although sexual name-calling is commonplace, the iteration of sex/gender norms and the meanings they carry can be radically overturned.
Sam: We could be sitting together like now and the boys could say, ‘Oh – yer lesbian’ or summit, and you just take it in.

Carla: Laugh it off.

Sam: We just laugh it off.

Julie: Me and Carla do.

Carla: We’ll just say, ‘Oh yes!’

Anoop: And they’ll actually say that to you?

Samantha: Mmm. And we’ll just carry it on and say, ‘Oh, are you coming up in the bush?’ or summit, and like carry it on as a joke or summit.

Julie: Me and Carla get called lesbians [by the boys] all the time but we just say, ‘Oh yeah, we’re proud of it!’ and we just shrug it off.

Emma: Yeah. Because you know you’re not.

Samantha: When you answer back, they can’t say anything because like …

Carla: Exactly! We say, ‘Yes, we are …’

Nicky: … [Name of a male student] We turn round and say, ‘Oh, do you want a threesome’ or something, and he’ll go, ‘Oh, I don’t know’ and they just like be quiet.

This discussion alerts us to what Butler terms the ‘performativity of gender’ (1990:139) in all its vibrancy and subtle shadings. The sign ‘lesbian’ is initially deployed by young men as a vernacular form of abuse against Julie and Carla. In the context of our ethnographic research it became evident that the term is not used to signify that the girls are gay, but rather, that they are ‘frigid’, boring and disinterested in boys. By affirming this sign (‘we’re proud of it!’) and locating it through the more familiar signifying chain of same-sex relationships the girls are able to overturn the
sign and enact a discursive repositioning of their sexual identities. This is then taken a step further when the identity, ‘lesbian’, is transformed into a sexually assertive style of femininity through the invocation of a ‘threesome’ and remarks about going over to the bushes; statements which dramatically reverse any prior association with frigidity. In doing so, the discursive enactment opens up the sign of gender to a multiplicity of subject positions that simultaneously bespeak a heterosexual femininity, lesbianism, bisexual identifications and sexual practices with multiple partners. Each of these imaginary identifications is ambivalent, split and inscribed within the other, giving rise to ‘hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion and proliferation’ (p.31). Because there is no authentic subject to speak of, the proliferation of sex/gender categories renders the sign excessive by prising open the closed signifier ‘girl’. Here, the initially derogatory remark ‘lesbian’ is subjected to a frisson which transforms its signification through discursive interplay, parody and subversion. That is to say, the production of these ‘logical impossibilities’ leads to the incitement of ‘subversive matrices of gender disorder’ (p.17).

There is much that is disturbing about the adoption and adaptation of sex/gender categories. For what does it say about gender identity if heterosexuals can ‘pass’ as lesbian, if the sexually passive suggest threesomes, or if hyper-heterosexual boys are silenced by the daunting reality of sex beyond the discursive regimes they seek to impose? It could be argued that recourse to any type of gender ontology is in itself an epistemological impossibility:

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it
seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effect of a discourse of primary and stable identity (p. 136).

In this way, the ‘girls’ – for the compulsion to interpellate the subject is barely avoidable in language – are able to resist and transgress the culture of heterosexual masculine schooling by disturbing the sacred ground upon which an authentic gender identity can be cultivated. Butler’s anti-foundationalist approach reveals how the naming or ‘interpellation’ (Althusser, 1971) of subjectivities as gay, straight or something in-between is a process of ‘hailing’ that summons these configurations to life. But of more interest is the actions themselves, the ‘doings’, and how the different performative tropes can come to unsettle the social constructionist idea of gender as a real ontological category, a true foundation of ‘being’. The lesbian masquerade by seemingly-straight girls not only discloses lesbianism as a performance, but reveals all sexual identifications as performative, rewriting the rubric that inscribes heterosexuality as natural. This ‘oblique’ version of lesbianism, straight-but-not-straight, has the capacity to resignify the heterosexual constructs through which it is partially and inevitably spoken, thus rendering problematic the very category of girlhood. As temporary and tenuous occupants of a ‘zone of uninhabitability’ (Butler, 1993:3) the girls ‘twist’ meanings of sex and gender. They enact lesbianism (‘We’re proud of it!’) at the same time as they refute it (‘because you know you’re not’) holding in tension presence and absence. These “‘ever-new” possibilities of resignification’ (p.224) occur because the subject is constructed on contingent foundations and, in the words of Jonathan Dollimore (1991), may engage
in acts of ‘sexual dissidence’ in which the ontology of the subject itself is queried and thereby ‘queered’.

Such stylised enactments parody gender from the ‘inside-out’ and can be considered transgressive forms of mimicry that transfigure identity and give rise to gender dissimulation. The postcolonial literary critic Homi Bhabha (1994), writing about the fraught colonial encounters between nation states, has also remarked upon the role of ‘irony, mimicry and repetition’ (p.85). He has argued that ‘in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference’ (p.86). In the rather different, but no less power-ridden terrain of gender relations we also find that mimicry means there can be no original female subject and no gender authority upon which lesbianism, straightness, nymphomania or frigidity can rightly be accorded. As Bhabha explains, ‘Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask’ (1994:88), rather it operates as ‘the metonymy of presence’ (p.89), that is the part that stands in for the whole. Here, we find that the gendered body is a highly dubious zone upon which to anchor difference and a treacherously slippery surface on which to sustain gender meaning. If we consider mimicry as Bhabha does, as ‘a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them’ (p.89), the appropriation of lesbianism by the young women is, then, a thoroughly ambiguous subversion of gender relations.

A neat illustration of the unsettling aspect of mimicry is evident in Frantz Fanon’s (1978) exemplary account of postcolonial race relations, Black Skin / White Masks which, as the title suggests, opens up the possibility – through a type of ‘splitting’ – for black skinned subjects to subconsciously masquerade and identify, however
precariously, as ‘white’. In terms of the subversion of identity we would argue that because signs are ultimately arbitrary constructions, wherein ‘The sign represents the present in its absence’ (Derrida, 1991:62), there is no semantic reason why blacks cannot ‘be’ white, or girls cannot ‘be’ boys: a disturbing challenge that the sociology of education has yet to fully reckon with.

**Regulation**

If the enactment of lesbian masquerade enables the subversion of identity to occur, it also throws into relief the extraordinary compulsion to ‘act straight’. In our discussions with young men we found that heterosexual masculinity was an impossible ideal that was struggled over, negotiated and reconstructed anew in the effort to make it appear ‘just-so’. Evidently, heterosexual masculinity was not something that could lie still, but continually had to be asserted, regulated and performed. The following extract, generated from school-based discussion with young people, provides an example of these regulatory processes. The context for our ‘sex talk’ developed from ethnographic investigation into the teaching and understanding of sex education and sexual practices in schools. One of the teachers we had spoken with mentioned using an HIV/AIDS video to promote safe sex to the class as part of the Personal and Social Education (PSE) curriculum. The teacher explained to us that video she deployed included black and white actors and focused upon two male protagonists: one gay, the other straight. In an attempt to subvert stereotypical associations that conflate homosexuality with AIDS, the film goes on to reveal, that it is the straight man that is HIV+. However, the gap between teaching
and learning became apparent when we enquired how young people understood the film.

Jason: We had that film once.
Clive: Which one?
Savage: It was about homosexuals weren’t it?
Clive: That was in Science.
Samantha: The only video we had in PSE was about crime and vandalism.
Jason: Was it in Science? That one about, how do … I can’t say it.
Clive: Homosexuality.
Jason: That’s the one.
Mary Jane: What was that then?
Shane: And you sat there and watched it?!!
Jason: We had to! We had to sit and watch it! We had no choice, we had to stay there and watch it!
Anoop: What lesson was this?
Jason: Science, arh, we don’t wanna know, we had to sit there and watch it.
Samantha: What was it about?
Jason: It was about these chaps, they told you they were gay.
Clive: Oh that. That was boring.

Where the teacher had referred to this method of teaching sex education as a model of ‘good practice’, the responses of students and in particular the young men we spoke with would suggest otherwise. Their resistance to pedagogy lies in part with the powerful identifications they are making with masculine heterosexuality. The careful
regulation of this identity is seen when Jason is unable to speak about homosexuality, when Shane challenges the others for watching the film, when Jason responds that he was forced into the viewing practice, and when Clive dismisses the event as ‘boring’. We may read Shane’s charge, ‘And you sat there and watched it?!?’ as a powerful performative act in peer-group cultures. For Butler ‘Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power’ (1993:225). This ‘binding power’ involves the ‘regulation of identificatory practices’ (p.3) and is seen when other students attempt to legitimate their viewing activities and blame the teacher for imposing the video upon them. Indeed, Jason’s response to the challenge erupts into excitable speech and iterations that contravene conventional understandings of heterosexual masculinity as secure, stable and rooted in certainty. For as Lynne Segal wryly remarks, in her critical engagement with masculinity, ‘the more it asserts itself, the more it calls itself into question’ (1990:123).

This compulsion to perform straight masculinity is collectively imposed, yet taken up with relish by the young men we spoke with. In Foucaultian terms, it would appear that the individual is both an effect of power and the element of its articulation. However, being a ‘proper boy’ – whatever that means – remains an imaginary ideal, the impossibility of which makes it no less a desirable subject position to inhabit. In this sense we could describe identification as the never-touching encounter that exists between the desiring subject and the desired object. For Butler, our sex is not something that lies beyond the discursive realm but is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms. Being a ‘proper boy’ or ‘proper girl’ is, then, a fantasy that is both hankered after and embodied through an approximation of its
norms. In writing ‘against proper objects’ Butler (1994:1) has remarked upon the everyday violence committed through the imposition of such normative phantasms. To this extent identity is also always an act of exclusion, a point of closure, the feverish demarcation of a boundary that elides the mercurial qualities of subjectivity itself. Moreover, this struggle for sex-gender signs (what it means to be a ‘lesbian’, a ‘proper boy’ and so on) is not an activity that is happening outside of our doing. Rather it is an inter-subjective process wherein we both act and are acted upon: we are concurrently the subjects and objects of the sign-making world.

What is also evident from the ethnography is the realisation that gender signs are constituted through difference. Words such as masculine and feminine are then social constructs, inscribed in a wider signifying chain of meaning within which one term refers to another, or more likely others through a systematic play of differences. It is because signs are arbitrary and differential that the relationships between them, how they are constituted in systems of meaning, are significant. The distinction between gender identity and gender identification is similar in many senses to the dissonance which exists in semiotics between the sign and the signified. Gender identity, like the signified is the ideal meaning, the point at which the sign and the signifier come together; gender identification on the other hand, can be likened to the sign, the free-floating signal that can only communicate meaning within a given encoded system of representation. This dissonance we describe between identity and identification, what Derrida (1991) calls ‘spacing’, means that they never quite occupy the same spatial and temporal zone, but engage in a complex shadow play where identity, image and imago intersect in the after-effects of the imaginary. Identification as an act of desiring is always subject to its ‘lack’ an issue we can further develop.
Because discourses are fused with power particular signs may come to take on a differing social status within the symbolic regime of language. Derrida deploys the term logocentricism to describe the Western pattern by which meaning is produced through a binary of presence and absence. The binary, designed around opposition and exclusion, seeks to avoid intermixture through the polarisation of categories, for example man/woman, white/black, straight/gay, able-bodied/disabled. In these examples the former component of the dichotomous equation subsumes and dominates the latter, performing its roles as a ‘master signifier’ whereupon the absented sign is impelled to take on a subordinate position as the ‘not said’, absence or ‘lack’. It is through this lacuna that gender subjectivities are styled, not only in the choices we make but implicitly through those we do not, the uncomfortable ‘not-like-me’ of identity we choose to repress. We can consider this as a powerful act of dis-identification in which the sign is dependent on this absence – its Other – in order to ‘be’.

In recent work Butler has gone on to regard this strategic displacement as a form of melancholia, where the identity that is actualised remains in a permanent state of mourning for the abject identifications that are disavowed. These acts of repudiation, expulsion and disavowal remain double-edged and reverberate with the costs of submitting oneself to becoming, say, a ‘proper boy’. As Butler explains:

This ‘being a man’ and this ‘being a woman’ are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of
identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never
chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse,
resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely

Rather than achieve a seamless replication of sex/gender norms Butler declares,
‘identification is the phantasmatic staging of the event’ (1993:105). What is it we
may ask, that enables some identifications such as heterosexuality to be repeatedly
‘staged’, in music, film, literature, advertisements and art while others remain, as the
ethnographic vignette reveals, barely speakable? For if we accept that ‘identity is a
signifying practice’ (Butler, 1990:145), then the act of identification remains a
strategy through which other signifiers are negated, repudiated or erased. The
previous extract is similarly marked by a series of ‘signifying absences’ (Butler,
1990:136) that reveal a dis-identification surrounding gay men, being HIV+, or
indeed, with the practice of sex education itself. Identity is, then, simultaneously, not
just an assertion of the Self but a constructed act of closure in that it defines what is
excessive, outré or abject.

However, we would be mistaken in assuming that dis-identification fully obliterates
those ‘Other’ possible identifications, or renders them obsolete. Rather, identification
is a partial, split and ambivalent process which, in the moment it announces itself as
‘identity’ (in common statements such as, ‘As black man ….’, or ‘Speaking as a
feminist…’) conceals its incurable multiplicity and precarious contingency. In this
respect, the act of identification is always an approximation as Stuart Hall explains:
Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. There is always ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality. Like all signifying practices, it is subject to the ‘play’ of difference. It obeys the logic of more-than-one (2000:17).

Because identities are constructed within, rather than outside discourse, they remain subject to the complex discursive interplay, strategic repositioning and repetitive regulation we have seen. The presence of the abject Other within, hollows out the meaning of identity and makes it unfamiliar to itself. Gender simulation is in keeping with Bhabha’s description of racial mimicry which ‘rearticulates presence in the terms of its “otherness”, that which it disavows’ (1994:91). It is precisely because identity is incomplete, a signifying act open to excess, that gender norms ‘are continually haunted by their own ineffectivity; hence, the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction’ (Butler, 2000:114).

**Embodiment**

Having outlined the anti-foundational approach to gender identity adopted by Butler and the accompanying regulatory and subversive tendencies that arise, a series of questions transpire. If gender identity is a fantasy, projected through the eye of imaginary sex difference, why is it such a compelling fiction to behold? If gender remains an impossible assignment to accomplish, why do so many of us continue to
submit to its exigencies? And if the subversion of gender is barely avoidable, a consequence of our inability to fully approximate its regulatory ideal, then how has it maintained its position as a hegemonic norm in the social world?

Butler has suggested that in order to better understand how social processes are made to appear ‘as real’ we need also to comprehend how the discursive and the material are embodied in everyday life. Butler develops Foucault’s insight that even the human body – that fleshy and seemingly most ‘natural’ of beings – is constituted in the discursive capillaries of medical, educational, judicial, military and religious technologies. Foucault has argued that the body is subject to an historical and discursive genealogy, being part of what Butler (1990:141) describes as a ‘social temporality’. The body is, in Foucaultian terminology, the product of a unique ‘bio-power’ (1978:143). While Foucault (1978), at least in his early work, has been criticized for neglecting the materiality of the body through a type of ‘discursive determinism’ which depicts the corporeal as ‘the inscribed surface of events, traced by language and dissolved by ideas’, Butler (1993) emphatically contends: bodies matter. Her concern, then, has not been to discount bodily experience as a few critics of *Gender Trouble* had suggested, but rather in ‘initiating new possibilities, new ways of bodies to matter’ (1993:30). In this reading gender identity is an embodied action that does not exist outside of its ‘doings’, rather its performance is also a reiteration of previous ‘doings’ that become intelligible as gender norms. In deploying the notion of embodiment, Butler has sought to reconcile the historically conceived signing of the body with an active notion of the performative. The way we style our bodies is neither a matter of sex (nature) nor simply an adjunct of the prevailing gender order (culture), rather it is one of the techniques through which we perform, enact and ‘do’
gender. In this respect, Butler regards sex and gender as ‘illusions of substance – that bodies are compelled to approximate, but never can’ (1990:146).

Throughout our ethnographic research on the meanings of gender and sexuality in young people’s cultural worlds we discovered that ideas about gender were habitually embodied. When investigating masculinities bodily forms of regulation were evident in the everyday practices we described as ‘playing it straight’ where young men would admonish one another through homophobic insults for sitting too closely together, speaking in high-pitched ‘squeaky voices’, crossing their legs, walking in a supposedly ‘mincing’ fashion, being slightly built or displaying an earnest, academic prowess (see Nayak & Kehily, 1996). As one student, Susan, explained to us, ‘If a boy crosses his legs or makes a comment … like rumours just spread’. She went on to add, ‘They pick on Gavin because he hasn’t got a masculine voice and … he’s not very well built’. There is, then, a whole disciplinary regime deployed to bolster and purport ‘the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence’ (Butler, 1990:137) through embodied activity.

These daily actions demonstrate how gender is regulated, performed and embodied in school-based cultures. Butler outlines the significance of the body as a medium through which the discursive signs of gender are given corporeal significance. Here, ‘words, acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause’ (p.136). Alongside the mundane performance of gender we also encountered some spectacular displays of heterosexual embodiment. An example of this was evident through a type
of crucifix performance, described here by young women when Anoop asks whether they felt boys or girls tended to be more homophobic in school.

Lucy: I think that boys are.
Susan: Yes, definitely.
Lucy: Because they go, ‘STAY AWAY!’ [demonstrates crucifix sign with fingers]
All: Yes!
Susan: Like as if he’s contagious.
Amy: If they're all sitting together like that (i.e. huddled up) one of them will move away.

We can consider the crucifix performance as an embodied display of hyperbolic heterosexuality. It entails the regulation of self and others, and forms part of the self-convincing rituals of masculinity. This performed identification is an act of ‘repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge’ (Butler, 1993:3). The construction of masculine heterosexuality is then dependent upon the iteration of the abject, the unliveable, the uninhabitable: what Butler calls, ‘that site of dreaded identification’ (p.3). Failure to comply with expected bodily modes of behaviour could result in a young man being labelled ‘gay’, symbolically crucified and subjected to bullying and harassment. Within the horror genre the invocation of Christian regalia (holy water, biblical scripture, crucifixes) is used to ward-off vampires, spirits and dark forces. The construction of the homosexual as predatory vampire forms a double threat. Gay men and vampires are abject figures, leaky bodies with the potential to pollute your blood through HIV and blood-sucking respectively, the consequences of which can lead to becoming part of the living dead. But underlying
this outward fear is a deeper, internal anxiety that in being ‘taken’ by a vampire/gay man, you too are transformed into that repudiated object through the return of the abject.

In The Powers of Horror Julia Kristeva (1982) configures Mary Douglas’s (1966) anthropological accounts of pollution and taboo through Lacanian psychoanalytic frames. Drawing upon Kristeva’s concept of abjection as derived through these readings, Butler explains the relationship between the body and defilement:

> The ‘abject’ designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered ‘Other’. This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the ‘not-me’ as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject (1990:133).

The production of HIV+ and gay identities as ‘monstrous Others’ is an embodied act deployed to provide heterosexual masculinity with the illusion of substance, whilst unintentionally summoning the abject to life. In the perpetual effort to convey its authenticity gender identity can only concede its inadequate fallibility. The need to perform, embody and anxiously repeat at once undermines and makes implausible gender accomplishment. Because gender is a rule that can only ever be approximated these stylised enactments fall short of the ideal they seek to inhabit. Although this makes gender subjectivity no less desirable to occupy, it does point to the impossibility of identity acquisition.
The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of
gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the
effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is
an ‘act’, as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-
criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of the ‘natural’ that in
their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status
(1990:146-7).

What is evident through the embodied performance of heterosexuality is the
recognition that gender signs forever carry with them the abject signifier they seek to
repress. Indeed, the abject Other must continually be expelled, disparaged and spliced
from the fictive being of the subject. For Butler this is a mutually constitutive
relationship where, ‘the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and
abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, the abject outside,
which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation’ (1993:3). The
act of enforcing imaginary queer Others to ‘stay away’ is, then, a performative and
deeply psychic gesture that aims to evacuate the sign of gayness from without and
within. But as Derrida has shown signs are not so readily displaced, rather their
meanings are deferred, carried forward in traces as encapsulated by his preferred term
différence, which is used to convey difference and deferral. The impossibility of
subjectivity, which is marked by presence and absence, has led Derrida to rewrite the
term ‘woman’ through the deleted inscription ‘(symbol required)’ to demonstrate how
identity is always under erasure. For these reasons, gender is constituted through
numerous ‘styles of the flesh’ (Butler, 1990:139) and forever bound to the circle of
repetition as it struggles to come to terms with the disturbing, troubling impossibility of what it means to ‘do’ identity. It is an act that can be done differently, undone or done away with altogether (Butler, 2004).

**Potentially useful knowledge?**

In this final section we ask how Butler’s ideas on gender and identity can help us understand the domain of school. Here we return to the three questions posed earlier: if gender identity is a fantasy, projected through the eye of imaginary sex difference, why is it such a compelling fiction to behold? If gender remains an impossible assignment to accomplish, why do so many of us continue to submit to its exigencies? And if the subversion of gender is barely avoidable, a consequence of our inability to fully approximate its regulatory ideal, then how has it maintained its position as a hegemonic norm in the social world?

While Foucaultian poststructuralist ideas have been generatively applied to educational settings, there remains a reluctance to fully embrace the performative paradigm proposed by Butler. At an ontological level, the processes of schooling assume the presence of sex categories as known and knowable, the immutable basis of gendered subjectivity. Teachers and students both contribute to and sustain the fiction of gender identity as real and significant in foundational terms. The effort expended in giving substance to the insubstantial suggests that the notion of gender identity occupies a kind of comfort zone for both parties, a settled certainty of the educative experience. While notions of the curriculum and knowledge itself may mutate in
response to changing educational policies or political realignments, notions of gender identity appear as an unassailable presence, a constant of the educational experience amidst the turmoil of reform and new initiatives. The collective dance that teachers and students perform through the choreography of appropriate gender behaviour can be seen as an illustration of a key theme of Butler’s thesis: the constant need to *do* gender bespeaks the unstable and phantasmatic status of sex categories themselves.

But what would the educational arena look like if Butler’s antifoundationalist critique was embraced? Our discussion attempts to outline some features of this engagement. The example we deploy of a girl putting on lipstick would, at least for Butler and some other Queer Theorists, be seen as an act of ‘girling’, bringing into being the subject. If we forget about the girl for a moment and think about the performance of putting on lipstick, Butler’s reading of such an act invites a reconsideration of subjects, objects and activities in school. Informal student cultures are saturated with objects such as lipstick, magazines, stickers, stationary and collectables of various kinds. In some studies these items appear as the underground economy of the student world, having use-value and symbolic significance to young people as members of total institutions. In other studies these items constitute the paraphernalia of gender in school, the ephemeral stuff of boyhood and girlhood that exists in the margins of life in school – in the playground, between lessons, in the corridors and washrooms. Tracing Foucault’s antifoundationalist approach through Butler’s notion of performance enables us to see these objects as technologies for the production of gendered selves. Through repeated actions these taken-for-granted objects are no longer simply the accoutrements of gender – the desired or discarded items of
boyhood or girlhood – but are transformed into the founding techniques through which these identities are realised.

While is possible to interpret actions in terms of subversion, regulation and embodiment, applying the antifoundational critique to school-based practice would challenge and disrupt the social relationships and educational processes that give the school an institutional identity. Within schools gendered performances are commonly treated as adolescent rehearsals for the main show to be staged with the onset of adulthood. Viewing the stylised enactments that students routinely engage in as parodies of gender rather than rehearsals for adulthood produces a significant shift in understanding, suggesting that the main show can only be simulated by repetitive displays that resemble masculinity and femininity but can never be it. In this respect young people are not subjects-in-the-making rather the making or ‘doing’ provides the fiction that there is a subject to be had. Gender identity within the space of the school remains realisable in different forms as young people rehearse, repeat and, occasionally, resist the fashionable tide of gender norms and meanings inherent in heterosexual hierarchies. While much research on gender and schooling works with notions of multiplicity, this is generally conceptualised as an effect of boy-girl embattlements and intra-group conflict rather than the negation of the subject itself. Gender is, then, an act of problematic being and unfulfilled becoming.

For those working in the sociology of education, and those fields contiguous with it, Butler’s ideas offer at least three key areas of investigation we wish to draw attention to for future research. Firstly, the Foucaultian focus on discourse enables us to see how gender is constituted as a ‘proper object’ with dense historical meanings that are

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routinely iterated in gestures, utterances and other performative acts. Secondly, Butler's writing draws our attention to the ways in which discursive relations are also configured through inner compulsions that may engender psychic processes of splitting, projection, desire, displacement, dis/identification and the repudiation of the abject. Thirdly, doing gender involves taking the body seriously as the corporeal signifier that gives shape to inner dramas and the doing in stylised performances. Viewed in these terms the body is a fragile, unreliable and potentially porous defender of the imagined subject. But it also is the site upon which prior iterations of gender can be performed and the locus through which previous 'doings' can be enacted. We suggest that utilising these lines of enquiry by way of the discursive, psychic and embodied experiences of schooling has the potential to offer challenging routes through which gender can yet be undone.

Footnotes

1 In this paper we draw upon our ethnographic research undertaken across four schools in the West Midlands area of England, from 1991 – 1997.
Bibliography


