

Narrative Performativity

Theorizing Imaginative Remembering in Judith Butler's Concept of Subject Formation

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At the core of every inquiry into political and ethical theory lies the question of the political and ethical agent, that is the question of the subject and of the process of how one comes to be what one is and can be. How do individuals as individuals come about? How does one become a person? A moral agent? These questions rest on the fundamental issue of how one *becomes* oneself, how one comes to have a concept of oneself and, even more precisely, of oneself as a subject.

Attempting to address a small part of this question, I would like to trace in a very brief first step Judith Butler's theory of subject formation, which understands the subject as being constantly subjected and emerging. Following that I would like to—extremely briefly—make some remarks on the problem of Butler's account for the possibility of agency with regard to the notion of intentionality because the non-identical subject seems to be necessarily unable to remember who it was and unable to imagine who it will be. That this problem can be successfully countered by recasting subject formation in terms of emplotment will be the main contention presented here. I would like to inquire into Paul Ricoeur's theory of emplotment, understanding it as “narrative performativity,” a narrative reflexivity that brings about the subject as understanding itself as extended over time. Casting this understanding as the capability of imaginative remembering, I would like to close with a few suggestions on how subject formation can integrate the dimension of the narrative emergence of the subject as self.

1. The Emergence of the Subject—Judith Butler’s Theory of Subject Formation

If, as Judith Butler has argued, a theory of the subject and subjectivity has to concern itself with explaining how subject and subjectivity are formed and emerge, then it is impossible to understand subject and subjectivity as something that one is and always already possesses as transcendentals of one’s existence. The lasting elusiveness and preliminary of becoming a subject must have an epistemological impact on our theories of the subject and subjectivity. In other words, we must acknowledge being a subject as a continuous process of becoming a subject, and thus a theory of the subject has to be cast as a theory of *subject formation*. Subject formation and hence also the incessantly emerging subject have to be historical, which means that they have to be extended over time and contingent in their being. In the self-reflexive movement that brings about the subject, this turn has to bring forth this subject as having an awareness of itself as having a history of its own. This movement is initiated and repetitively sustained by the economy of passionate attachment to life in general that is a will and desire to be.

The key notion in Butler’s investigations into this process is her understanding of this process as subjectivation. For Butler, the process of becoming a subject is a process of becoming subordinated by power with power and of this subjection being the necessary condition for the existence of the subject. Butler understands power not only “as *forming* the subject,” but also “as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire” (PL 2).¹ The form of this power is the “turning back upon oneself or even a turning *on* oneself” (PL 3); this dynamic is a passionate and violent turn that brings about the subject. In Butlerian terms, this movement reveals the paradox of referentiality in subjection because of the necessity to refer to that which does not yet exist, namely the subject. Subjectivation thus carries connotations both of being rendered a subject and being subjected. Because the subjectivating force is power and because power is understood as the multiplicity and interconnectedness of power vectors in the social arena, subjectivation is a process that always must and can only take place in the social. The subjects as individual persons that exist only due to subjectivation are then fragile and discursive, but also always already exceed the description and the norms that produce them. The subject as the product of subjectivation emerges as a site of contestation, as “the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency” (PL 11).²

To argue that persons as subjects are discursively constituted does not mean that there are no real bodies, pains, pleasures, and desires, but it does mean that the reality of these bodies, pains, pleasures, and desires is dependent on their being experienced as such. Experiencing something as something always necessarily depends on a hermeneutic paradigm of that experience that makes it available as experience. Yet this paradigm is not simply a closed world-view in itself within which one is immersed and to which one is unalterably confined. Rather one always already experiences the limits and breakage points of one's hermeneutic framework and while the limits and breakage points are experienced, they resist total sublation into reflective knowledge. This resistance depends on the fact that every paradigm works according to a certain foreclosure that occasions the preservation and return of that which cannot be signified within the given order of being. Experience as interpretation is thus a practice that depends on the code of intelligibility. Therefore, to become and be a person, one constantly and repeatedly has to practice oneself and form oneself and "is practiced" and formed through, within, and with regard to the norms of intelligibility. These norms and codes, however, are not fixed, ahistorical, and static, but in being reproduced they are productive themselves, and, furthermore, in depending on citation, they are always subject to slippage and reappropriations, because, as Butler argues with great fervor, "repetition ... is never merely mechanical. As the appearance of power shifts from the condition of the subject to its effects, the conditions of power (prior and external) assume a present and futural form" (*PL* 16). The subjection by power that conditions subject formation through its dependence on reiteration is temporalized, active and productive. Here we can now see how the Butlerian concept of "performativity," which is the compulsory reiteration of norms (see *BTM* 94-95),³ works in subject formation. The performatively emerging subject is the product of the repetition of the social signifying norms that confer intelligibility.⁴ This repetition of norms is "what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject" (*BTM* 95). Subject formation hence is the sedimentative or materializing effect of repeated acts over time.

2. Towards Narrative Performativity

2.1 The Problem of Agency

The fact that the "agency-issue" remains unresolved is a criticism often leveled against Butler's contentions.⁵ Butler states that her project is not to determine "whether certain kinds

of significations are good or bad, warranted or unwarranted” (“For a Careful Reading” 138),⁶ but she wishes to argue for “a sense of agency ... which is able to renew the resources of the past in the direction of a future distinctly different.”⁷ It is not necessary for her project that she delineates a theory of how we decide which practices are to be condemned and which to be condoned, since this goes beyond the scope of a theory of subject formation. It is necessary, however, to explain how the subjects become capable of deliberation and intention.

Intentional action is produced in relation to a self-concept; this entails a dimension of projection on the one hand, i.e., openness for the future and anticipation and imagination of oneself in the future. It also entails a dimension of retrospection on the other hand, i.e., the capacity to craft a past and the necessity of carrying around a past, of being formed by past attachments, but also the conscious forming of those attachments. An account for the creative capacity is necessary as well as an account of how it is intertwined with the regulating forces, with the subjectivation that works, in Butlerian terms, as an economy of passionate attachments.

2.2. Enacted Emplotment—Tracing Paul Ricoeur’s Theory of Emplotment

As Butler pointed out in a recent essay, in Foucault’s later writings the “self” emerges as a notion of a “reflexive interiority”,⁸ and he contends that selfhood is a creative process that has to be understood as a “work of art.” The “self” is thus not a substance or primary immediacy, but a process of formation and stylization. Departing somewhat from Butler and Foucault we can now consider that this formation works through interior reflection and at the same through “intersubjective interaction,” and this formative process with its two aspects always has a diachronic as well as synchronic dimension, or, put it another way, the synchronic situation is always a situation extended over time. Time as lived time or human time is always fabricated. The aspect of lived time is constitutive for the emerging as someone who has a concept of oneself as oneself. This formation of a self-concept can be understood as emplotment.

Emplotment is, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “the organization of the events” that transforms individual occurrences into meaningful events by working them into a larger context of a plot that is constantly emerging as the events are being organized. The dialectic here is that neither is the meaningful event preexistent to the plot nor is the plot as organizing idea preexistent to the meaningful events, but both are formed through the other. The self-concept

as the story of one's life that one narrates as one's *own* story is orchestrated by the function of emplotment. Emplotment thus is a conferral of intelligibility, rendering the contingent into a necessity and integrating it into a larger whole.

The function of emplotment has been theorized and examined in the three volumes of Paul Ricoeur's inquiry into the relation between time and narrative. He contends that emplotment mediates "[the] relationship between a lived experience where discordance rends concordance and an eminently verbal experience where concordance mends discordance" (*TN* 1:31).⁹ Emplotment is the negotiation of the limits of concordance and thus the reflection on the dialectic of concordance and discordance. The fabrication of a concordance that is incessantly discordant is understood in terms of producing a remainder that continuously disturbs the concordance. This remainder escapes the totalization of absorption into reflection and hence the creation of discordant concordance—that is the creation of one's story—is never simply at one's disposal.

This crafting of a self-concept is, for Ricoeur, the poetic activity of mimesis. Mimesis does not mean that a copy of some original real-life event is fabricated in terms of a "representation" or "redoubling of presence" (*TN* 1:45). Mimesis rather is a sort of "creative imitation" that constitutes the rupture that opens space for figuration and refiguration.¹⁰ In the movement of narrative fabrication plot is inscribed into the story and here the mediation between the singular occurrences and the story as a whole as well as between the "heterogeneous factors" (*TN* 1: 65) of agents, goals, motives, interactions, results, etc., takes place by rendering the individual incident more than an individual action through ascription of significance for the whole of the story. We can thus say that the connection between the events that infers coherence is the narration that comes too late as it always comes after the incident; it is only in the recounting that this coherence or concordance is possible at all.

The intelligibility of the events and their relation to the whole depends on the conferral of a "sense of an ending" that is plausible and thus acceptable. This exposes the operation of emplotment as subject to norms and rules of intelligibility that determine what counts as plausible and acceptable and what does not. Thus when Ricoeur asserts that "[t]he productive imagination is not only rule-governed, but it constitutes the generative matrix of rules" (*TN* 1:68), in a Butlerian vein this expresses the dialectic of subjection that is the condition for the emergence of the subject in which the subjectivating norms and rules expose themselves as never merely curbing, subjecting, and prohibiting, but also as productive and generative regarding both the formation of the subject and the transformation and resignification of the norms and rules. The freedom of signification is restricted by that which has to remain

unsignifiable, because those narratives that cannot be crafted continue to be present in the form of the fragmentary trace or remainder that disrupts—the return of the repressed that tears the neatly woven narrative network and constantly necessitates renegotiation.

This renegotiation and refiguration always means a reconfiguration of the praxis; as the notion of “narrative performativity” implies, the meaning of the narrative constitutes praxis and bears full weight only in its actualization in praxis. The direction towards future action elucidates that emplotment as narrative self-constitution cannot be captured as a function of a remembering that is merely retrospective. Emplotment entails the imaginative power of anticipating; one emerges as subject as one that has a concept of oneself with regard to future action and not only as one that makes sense of and thus identifies with “the one who I was in the past.” This identification is a phantasmatic staging of coherence, because the position of “the one who I was” as such is an imaginary location.¹¹ In this dimension of creative anticipation that relies on a restaging and imaginative remembering we encounter the infinite lack of closure that is the ineffaceable openness and indeterminacy of subject formation.

2.3 Imaginative Remembering in Subject Formation

From a deconstructionist position one could now fear that a theory of emplotment would reinstitute the subject as the arelational master-subject that Butler, in following Derrida, so insistently deconstructs. To show that such fears are needless, it is necessary to consider the role of the unconscious, of forgetting, and of the hermeneutic paradigms that are constituted by and operate through the effectiveness of the signifying norms. The process of subject formation in its dimension as narrative emergence produces and at the same time originates from the relation of oneself with oneself and with others. Subject formation in this regard is instituted by a triple-dialectic, the dialectic of the trajectories of the intrasubjective and intersubjective intertwined with the dialectic of the diachronic and synchronic and with the dialectic of unconscious and conscious.

The subject formed and forming itself as itself as emplaced and extended over time is an enacted narrative, but always exceeds that narrative. Others always “read a story” into us, and the task is to mediate the story we come to tell about ourselves and the story others come to tell about us. Even the story I come to tell about myself exceeds me insofar as it is my coming to terms with the stories about me that have been assigned to me, and it also exceeds me, since I am subject to my experiences, my memories, passions, and desires as they well up. Thus, the decision of what needs to be negotiated is beyond my determination, especially

because that which is narrated and rendered coherent is determined by that which cannot be narrated and has to remain unconscious and beyond the scope of narratability as its constitutive outside.

To maintain a workable self-concept, the life-story must be retold again and again and, in fact, retold anew every time. But this crafting of this story is never completely arbitrary and free. The traces of memory restrict arbitrary signification and resignification; they restrict the number of plots, the variety of selves that can be invoked. This unstable self-concept is constantly disturbed by that which needs to be excluded from remembering. Remembering at its heart is forgetfulness;¹² it is an attempt to grasp that which is out of and beyond reach. The subject, rather than being in charge of its story, emerges in being subjected to its story that enables the enunciation of the “I” in which the subject exceeds the occasion of its formation precisely through its limitation. The mode of existence thus never is one of consolidating self-certainty but one of attestation that accounts for the subject’s “coming too late” and “remaining preliminary” that casts the subject as one that is constantly unbecoming in its becoming.

The intention of this paper was to inquire into the Butlerian theory of subject formation that understands this process performatively and to attempt to come to terms with the discontent regarding the question of intentional agency. The idea presented in this paper is to establish imaginative remembering as a constitutive concept in Judith Butler’s theory of subject formation so that the subjects emerging can be understood as emerging as agents capable of deliberate and intentional action while retaining the concept of performative subjectivation. The process of being formed as and forming a reflective relation with oneself through emplotment is governed by the triple-dialectic of intrasubjective and intersubjective, of diachronic and synchronic as well as of unconscious and conscious. Imaginative remembering then is captured as a differential that constitutes human potentiality, rather than as a property inherent to a subject. The form of this human potentiality is that of always already being entangled in stories, but these stories are permanently only partially unfolded, and how they unfold in a given situation is never predeterminable. One inevitably is entangled in a plurality of stories in both directions of past and future, and neither past nor future is ever brought to the point of full closure.

¹ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997).

² Drawing on Louis Althusser, who introduces the “individual” as a “placeholder” to retain the subject as a dynamic emerging concept, Butler emphasizes that “subject,” as well as “individual” and “person,” needs to be understood as “a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation” (PL 10). In her Introduction to *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler argues that the “subject” should not be understood as interchangeable with “individual” or “person,” but as a “site” that is then occupied by “individuals” (10). Because the individual as such does not exist as an intelligible being without first undergoing subjectivation, Butler cautions against thinking of the individual as preceding the subject, as some authentic core that then acquires a certain subject position. The question of the distinction between these concepts becomes less clear throughout her work, however, and she seems to abandon the position of the subject as not interchangeable with the individual or the person in favor of “a certain promiscuous ‘mentioning’... in order to show that the kind of analysis I am doing does not work to censor the mentioning of these terms. ... I would not want to offer definitions of these various terms self, individual, etc., because that would be precisely to offer them as pure concepts, not as terms with a historicity which is being furthered by an unanticipated use” (Butler, personal communication, May 9, 2001).

³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁴ It would be to mistake the core idea of performativity to understand this subject as one *performing* the repetition of norms, as if in a theatrical performance in which one comes along as such-and-such an individual and now enacts another particular role on the stage that then enacts, “seduces to life,” this stage persona.

⁵ See Benhabib, Seyla. “Feminism and Postmodernism.” In Benhabib, Seyla, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 1995, 17-34. Benhabib, Seyla. “Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics.” In *Feminist Contentions*, 107-126. Barvosa-Carter, Edwina. “Strange Tempest: Agency, Poststructuralism, and the Shape of Feminist Politics to Come.” *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 6:1/2 (2001): 123-137. Disch, Lisa. “Judith Butler and the Politics of the Performative.” *Political Theory* 27:4 (1999): 545-559. Nelson, Lise. “Bodies (and Spaces) Do Matter: The Limits of Performativity.” *Gender, Place and Culture* 6 (1999): 331-353. Vasterling, Veronica. “Butler’s Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical Assessment.” *Hypatia* 14:3 (1999): 17-38. McNay, Lois. *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

⁶ Judith Butler, “For a Careful Reading,” *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, by Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser. (New York: Routledge, 1995) 127-144. As Butler contends, not every resignificatory practice is to be condoned: “The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility *qua* possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that *already* exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible” (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. 189). The question rehearsed by Edwina Barvosa-Carter, whether all resignification is subversive with regard to the hegemonic norm, has to be answered affirmatively, yet just because some practice is subversive does not mean that it is to be tolerated or even supported. Nevertheless, Butler constantly avoids some questions that arise in the context of her admitting that not “every new possibility *qua* possibility” is to be heralded. It becomes very clear what Butler means here if we look at the example of Afghan women, who under the Taliban regime were forced to wear the burqa and so completely cover themselves in public in order not to be perceivable as individuals. Yet there are women who had been educated and who had before the Taliban actively participated in public life who have fled Afghanistan because of their oppositional work, because these possibilities of understanding “being a woman” have been rendered culturally impossible under the Taliban. The example of the existence of these women shows that it is not about inventing new and fully novel possibilities, but the goal is to open these existing forms of impossible life as real possibilities within this society in which they have been rendered impossible.

⁷ Judith Butler, personal communication, May 9, 2001. The openness of Butler’s theory has its *fundamentum in re* and thus is a programmatic one, as the purpose is to open the sites of contestation and allow those forms of life in to participate in the contest that had been previously rendered unintelligible; the purpose is not to make a prescription in terms of “subvert ... in the way that I say, and life will be good” (GT xxi). As Lisa Disch points out, a question regularly posed to Butler is how transformative action can be affirmed if it is not enabled by a utopian account giving it direction and not supplied with criteria independent of power. It is impossible to come up with a vision of a “beyond power” or one that is criteria independent, because, as Butler eloquently argues, it is only through the works of power and within the multivectorial networks of power relations that subjects emerge and become agents. Her account needs to remain anti-utopian, as Elliot Jurist argues, because of the “competing tendencies in Butler: her ‘post-liberatory’ politics concedes the limits of what can be done, but her political activism refuses compliance” (Jurist, Elliot L. *Beyond Hegel and Nietzsche: Philosophy, Culture, and Agency*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000, 280).

⁸ See especially *The Care of the Self*. Volume 3 of *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1988.

⁹ Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. 3 vols. Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

¹⁰ Mimesis is “the connection ... which establishes precisely the status of the ‘metaphorical’ transposition of the practical field by the muthos” (TN 1:46). This allows for a productive connection between Ricoeur’s concept of mimesis as “creative imitation” and Butler’s concept of mimesis as evoked in her concept of parody. Parody itself is introduced into Butler’s argument by her interpretation of drag as gender parody that “reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (GT 175). The preeminent question for Butler is how identities become naturalized and instituted as “authentic,” and parody here opens a possibility of interpreting this process. One could say the “original” is rendered original in a process of a double mimesis whereby the second mimetic duplication functions to disavow precisely the mimetic character. The avowed “conv” as *avowed* conv has to undergo a double mimesis just as well

to be installed as a *copy*. The so-called copy, therefore, could not be a copy without the so-called original and the so-called original could not be original without the copy. Parody thus is a creative imitation that opens the space for recontextualization and resignification by perpetual displacement. The focus therefore is on parody as a stylization; gender, as Butler points out, then is to be seen as a “corporeal style” (*GT* 177). From here it is possible to extend Butler’s concept of parody beyond gender identity and to draw a connection between her and Ricoeur.

¹¹ At this point the question of pre-reflective knowledge seems to arise again, because obviously there seems to be an intimate relationship that makes my experiences and the “I in the past” the only ones available for me as positions to identify with. Identification is thus not fully arbitrary, because the “mineness” of the position rules out the free identification with another position. The point here is not to call into question this limitation, but rather to assert it under the auspices of the turning that institutes reflexivity and thus retroactively also installs a moment of the “pre-reflexive.”

¹² As Heidegger argues: “Just as expectation is possible only on the basis of awaiting, *remembering* is possible only on the basis of forgetting, *and not the other way around*. In the mode of forgottenness, having-been primarily ‘discloses’ the horizon in which Da-sein, lost in the ‘superficiality’ of what is taken care of, can remember” (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993]. Citation is taken from the English translation: *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh [Albany: SU of New York P, 1996] 312).