

This Side of “Beyond Identity Politics”: On Butler’s Reading of Lacan’s Theory

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Introduction

The main aim of this essay is to examine Judith Butler’s reading of Jacques Lacan’s theory. Many critics, such as Jane Gallop and Elizabeth Grosz, acknowledge the possibility of the contribution by the later theory of Lacan, namely that of the *jouissance féminine*, to non-phallogocentric feminist theories: for example,

The Woman does not describe ‘women’, but is rather a site of feminist contestation.... For psychoanalysis, ‘femininity’ is a symptom of that contingency, failure and incompleteness. It is a symptom because female subjectivity is an ‘indetermination’ of a *not all*, posited as an exception to the phallic function. For this reason, the ‘riddle’ of femininity has proven to be a source of much difficulty for psychoanalysis. (Campbell 90–91, original emphasis)

Grosz says: “If, as Gallop suggests, Lacan is both phallus and prick, both authority and its excess, both phallogocentric and beyond the phallus, it is not surprising that his work has generated controversy and disagreement among feminists” (184). Butler, one of the most influential feminists of today, also appreciates the true value of Laca-

nian *jouissance féminine* (*Bodies That Matter* 256),⁽¹⁾ but still criticizes Lacanian theory, because its “morphological scheme” “is marked as masculine, and, hence, becomes the basis for an anthropocentric and androcentric epistemological imperialism” (*Bodies That Matter* 73). Consequently, her reading of Lacanian theory is inconsistent, which would be caused by the incoherence of Lacan’s theory pointed out by Grosz and Gallop. If Butler’s inconsistency, however, is derived from the essence of her own criticism, it should be well worth exploring the reason for her inconsistency. This essay therefore explores how the defect would be caused by a tendency of her criticism, and proves that the undiscovered analogy between her theory and the *jouissance féminine* can suggest the significance of the contradiction and the problem inherent in her critical position. The similarity could also contribute to a partial theoretical redefinition of the *jouissance féminine*.

A Deconstructionist as Hegelian

Despite its significant contribution to anti-phallogocentrist thoughts, Butler’s criticism of the phallogocentrism and heterosexism of Lacanian theory in *Bodies That Matter* is imperfect for the total and accurate comprehension of Lacanian theory. One of her major defects in discussion on psychoanalysis would be that Butler concentrates on the deconstruction of phallogocentrism and almost disregards the intricate non-phallogocentric aspect in his theory, the *jouissance féminine*, propounded particularly in *Encore*. Indeed, the following citation from an endnote of *Bodies That Matter* unquestionably proves that Butler roughly but adequately comprehends the Lacanian *jouissance féminine*:

Contiguous relations disrupt the possibility of the enumeration of the sexes, i.e., the first and second sex. Figuring the feminine as/through the contiguous thus implicitly contests the hierarchical binarism of masculine/feminine. This opposition to the quantification of the feminine is an implicit argument with Lacan’s *Encore*.... It constitutes one sense in which the femi-

As Butler values it, Lacan attempts to undermine the dualism of phallogocentrism itself and to formulate the possibility of the desire beyond phallogocentrism especially in his later works. Nevertheless, curiously, it is only on the endnote of *Bodies That Matter* that she explicitly refers to the *jouissance féminine*. In contrast, she generally regards Lacanian theory to be phallogocentrism and eloquently declares that psychoanalysis would argue that “[t]he coexistence of the binary is assumed, and then repression and exclusion intercede to craft discretely gendered ‘identities’ out of this binary...” and that “Lacanian discourse centers on the notion of ‘a divide,’ a primary or fundamental split that renders the subject internally divided and that establishes the duality of the sexes” (*Gender Trouble* 73–74).

This is the reason why Moya Lloyd observes: “One of the aims of Butler’s work is thus to challenge the heteronormativity of Lacanian psychoanalysis” (Lloyd 91). For the challenge, according to Lloyd, Butler conspicuously adopts deconstructive strategies particularly from *Bodies That Matter* onwards: she obviously regards instability “as central to the consolidation of heteronormativity” (64) and deconstructs heteronormativity, or phallogocentrism, by disclosing instability.⁽²⁾ Nevertheless, the phallogocentrism criticized by her is just an aspect of Lacanian theory: it bears the other aspect of the *jouissance féminine* that is entirely different from the phallogocentrism. Her disregard of it necessarily causes the serious inconsistency in her total understanding of Lacanian theory.

The cause of the fault can be discovered in the reason for her tackling of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and thus reveal the essence of her criticism. Since deconstruction is generally the operation to unveil inconsistency in a system, she perseveringly struggles to disclose a failure inherent in phallogocentrism. The Freudian School, according to her, assumes that the principle of recognition is essentially based on the phallus, and the typical model of human recognition is, therefore, sought out first of all in the male one (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 72–74; Lacan, *Écrits* 692). The symbolic order maintained and suspended by the phallus as the only origin of

validity and authority is for woman nothing but the effect of male epistemology, so that the phallus is one of the central causes of alienation for woman, and also generates dualism in the Western thinking parallel to heterosexuality as the norm in sexuality. Butler discloses that heterosexuality as the natural actually presumes phallogocentrism, and attempts to deconstruct it.

Her deep concern for the alienation under the dominant system has evidently manifested itself from the beginning of her own academic career on, which is representatively shown by the fact that in her own dissertation, *Subjects of Desire*, she tackled Hegel and his thought of “*Entfremdung*” ‘alienation’ and “*Kampf um Anerkennung*” ‘the struggle of recognition’ (Hegel 145–55). Butler herself admits in *Subjects of Desire* that “[i]n a sense, all of my work remains within the orbit of a certain set of Hegelian questions: What is the relation between desire and recognition, and how is it that the constitution of the subject entails a racial and constitutive relation to alterity?” (xiv) Her deconstruction of phallogocentrism must be above all for the struggle of alienated minorities for recognition; accordingly, her addressing of Lacanian psychoanalysis must theoretically derive from her profound concern about Hegelian “*unglückliche Bewußtsein*” ‘unhappy self-consciousness’ as an effect of alienation (Hegel 145–77). For example, discussing Hegel, she says: “Female desire follows the course of a ‘double-alienation’—a renunciation of the mother and a shift of libidinal attachment to the father that is then prohibited and displaced ...” (*Subjects of Desire* 203–04). Her concern for alienation is clearly shown in her discussion on the “mirror stage,” which is Lacanian version of Hegelian master-slave dialectic, and the “lesbian phallus” (*Bodies That Matter* 57–91).

In consequence, her criticism of Lacanian theory that stems from her tackling of Hegel should reveal the very core of her criticism. The Hegelian subject, according to her, does not “suffer its self-loss,” but “is the very action of desire as it perpetually displaces the subject.” She therefore denies “Lacanian corrective to the Hegelian subject,” and then says: “... the Hegelian subject’s encounter with difference is not resolved into identity. Rather, the moment of its ‘resolution’ is finally indistinguishable from the moment of its dispersion ...” (*Subjects of Desire* xv). Nevertheless, this paradoxical

cally suggests how she is sensitive to negation and aspires to overcome it.

A few Problems of Butler's Deconstructive Strategies

In deconstructing phallogocentrism for recognition, Butler fails to grasp Lacan's non-phallogocentrism theory. This must result from a theoretical defect intrinsic in her deconstructive strategies, which must relate to a theoretical problem partly common to deconstruction and Lacanian phallus. In "Pour l'amour de Lacan," Derrida admits that while Lacanian theory attempts to reconstitute some deconstructible motifs, it is the most similar to deconstruction in a respect (72-74). Both of them, according to Hiroki Azuma, argue on a crucial logical contradiction in a system that is deconstructible or "*objet a*" (94-116). Azuma points out that Lacanian phallus and one of some types of deconstruction can finally mystify a crack or flaw of system and then reveals that the mystification could occasionally connect with a kind of traumatism and *le sentiment* that is naturally sentimental and illogical and thus can illogically lead to exclusive political actions (50-61, 102-10).

Butler seemingly avoids such unexpected linkage between illogicalness and traumatism and *le sentiment*. Many critics positively or negatively consider Butler declares that there are "no independent truths of sex, gender and sexuality on which we can build our identity" (Jagger 137). Lois McNay appreciatively says that as, more than any other feminist theorist, Butler has pushed feminist theory beyond the polarities of the essentialist debate in her elaborations of gender identity as not immutable, her idea has been important in opening up new critical and theoretical terrains for sex and gender (175). Butler is usually regarded as an excellent performer who flees across the borders between the normal and the abnormal and goes beyond identity politics. Her idea of performativity and critique of identity categories involves a shift from identity politics based on sameness to politics of identification, which is the examination of the political construction of identities occasionally based on exclusions.⁽³⁾

In her deconstructive operations, nonetheless, she might practice identity poli-

tics in the end. The essence of Lacanian theory that the phallus suspends paradoxically with its nothingness the Symbolic on which signification endlessly circuits should be partly equivalent to the following essence of Butler's theory: "what is emphasized in Butler's argument is that structures of subject formation have no central point of authorization, no overarching logic of non-contradiction that separates heteronormative forms of exchange from those that seem so different" (Kirby 60). "[N]o overarching logic of non-contradiction" is certainly to a disturbing deconstructive point as one crack of system is to *objet a* in the Symbolic. Azuma points out that one of some types of deconstruction is remarkably parallel to Lacan's theory. Butler often attempts to discover a determinate logical contradiction of phallogocentric epistemology:

First, the use of "sexual difference" to denote a relation simultaneously anatomical and linguistic implicates Lacan in a tautological bind. Second, another tautology appears when he claims that the subject emerges only as a consequence of sex and sexual difference, and yet insists that the subject must accomplish and assume its sexed position within language. (*Bodies That Matter* 97)

She discloses the tautological bind between the phallus at meta-level and the sexed body as matter at the object level.⁽⁴⁾ This would be fundamentally equivalent to the relation of \mathcal{S} (the barred subject) $\rightarrow a$, which is indicated by the table on page seventy-three of *Encore*, in that both of them concern with a logical imperfection of the system: the relation of $\mathcal{S} \rightarrow a$, which Azuma links with negation, can virtually urge her to deconstruct phallogocentrism. Her deconstructive strategy curiously parallel to Lacanian *objet a* or the phallus that consist in one crack of system is essentially inconsistent with the *jouissance féminine* that does not imply negation, but "the contiguous." This must be one of the main reasons why she does not incorporate it into her own deconstructive theory. The projection of something prohibited on a crack of the system for recognition, according to her, is both the result of and the conquest of

melancholy, whose instance would be the lesbian phallus. It is the projection of and sublation of lack and alienation, and thus identification with them after all. She would then finally substantialize difference, whereas she ostensibly denies the dissolution of difference into identity. Rather, she seems to quest for unintended identity in a sense. It might seem to be the new identity politics built on negation that Butler would compare one deconstructible point of the Symbolic with irrepresentable identity of minority. The unexpected and secrete linkage of deconstruction and identity politics of minorities would be more evidently indicated by her political practice in her later works. Her limitations of total comprehension of Lacan's theory should be derived from her own theoretical and critical strategy (of course, not from her own personal sentiment).

Surplus and Cuteness

There is a turn in Lacan's theory, at which Lacan's focus shifts from the phallogocentric to the non-phallogocentric. In relation with the turn, the *jouissance* is generally classified into two types: the phallic *jouissance* and the *jouissance féminine*. In contrast with the former, which totally consists in the negation caused by castration, the latter does not totally result from the negation and thus cannot be perfectly defined in the Symbolic. All the *jouissances* are phallic, but this does not mean that there cannot be some *jouissances* that are not phallic. Lacan eloquently addresses in his seminar: woman grounds herself as being "not-whole" in situating herself in the phallic function. Hence, there is no woman: "La femme, ça ne peut s'écrire qu'à barrer La. Il n'y a pas La femme, article défini pour désigner l'universel. Il n'y a pas La femme puisque ... elle n'est pas toute" (*Encore* 68, Lacan's emphasis) ("Woman can only be written with a bar through it. There's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital *W* indicating the universal. There's no such thing as Woman because ... she is not-whole"; *On Feminine Sexuality* 72–73, original emphasis). "The *not all* is a position that is neither 'inside' nor 'outside' the Symbolic order but is in excess of its phallic imaginary," which Lacan calls "*Une jouissance au-delà du phallus*" '*jouissance*

beyond the phallus': the *jouissance féminine* "can only ex-sist, it cannot exist" (Campbell 90; Lacan, *Encore* 69; Fink 39). The *jouissance féminine* consists in being doubled in the relations of $\mathcal{L}a \rightarrow \Phi$ and $\mathcal{L}a \rightarrow S(\mathcal{A})$, or the signifier of the lack in the Other, so that woman is doubled ("*elle se dédéboule*") (Lacan, *Encore* 75). This denies castration and thus is beyond phallogocentrism (Barnard 172). Gallop somewhat obscenely describes woman's desire as an ambivalently phallogocentric and a surprisingly non-phallic gesture: "'Encore' calls both for a repetition of the phallic performance, and for more, for something else.... he jokingly refers to as 'beyond the phallus' ..." (35). Because of the deviation and fragmentation of the "not all," no one can precisely formulate the *jouissance féminine* and define woman.

The doubleness that Lacan glimpses in woman cannot be consistent with the deconstructive strategies that Butler intentionally adopts to tackle Lacanian phallus for recognition. This must be one of the reasons for her deficient comprehension of Lacan's theory. The phallus is a token of lack, but, in contrast, the *jouissance féminine* assumes at once lack and surplus: "*Ce n'est pas parce qu'elle est pas-toute dans la fonction phallique qu'elle y est pas du tout. Elle y est pas pas du tout. Elle y est à plein. Mais il y a quelque chose en plus. / Cet en plus, faites attention ...*" (Lacan, *Encore* 69, Lacan's emphasis) ("It's not because she is not-wholly in the phallic function that she is not there at all. She is *not* not at all there. She is there in full.... But there is something more.... / Be careful with this 'more' ..."; *On Feminine Sexuality* 74).⁽⁵⁾

Nevertheless, the doubleness of *jouissance féminine* between $\mathcal{L}a \rightarrow \Phi$ and $\mathcal{L}a \rightarrow S(\mathcal{A})$ should not be inconsistent with every type of deconstruction. Woman secretly holds different ways of approach to the phallus. Hence, although Butler virtually disregards Lacanian *jouissance féminine*, regardless of her intention, part of her deconstruction can also bear similarities to the logic that tries to explain the *jouissance féminine*.

It is then critically important that Butler's deconstructive operations in *Bodies That Matter* could be roughly divided into a few types, one of which can be based on "the incommensurability of the imaginary and the symbolic" (106) and in more detail categorized into relatively two types, just as Derrida himself admits that there

are two styles of deconstruction, non-historic for logical-formal paradoxes and more historic or more anamnestic (*Force de loi* 48). First, Butler targets some logical contradictions of Lacan's theory.⁽⁶⁾ The logical contradictions are fully on the paternal symbolic order, and thus, according to Azuma, should be denied, for it is theoretically equivalent to the Lacanian phallus. The first might be a logical basis for the second in a sense. Second, Butler detects the invasion of the Symbolic by the Imaginary through a split caused by the tenuousness of border between them.

If the symbolic is structured by the Law of the Father, then the feminist resistance to the symbolic unwittingly *protects* the father's law by relegating feminine resistance to the less enduring and less efficacious domain of the imaginary.... By accepting the radical divide between symbolic and imaginary, the terms of feminist resistance reconstitute sexually differentiated and hierarchized "separate spheres." (*Bodies That Matter* 106, Butler's emphasis)

In this way, Butler disproves the solid border between the Symbolic and the Imaginary and insists on the magnitude of the deconstruction of them based on the imaginary level that includes a bodily image and thus is the basis of performativity, whose practical instance is the lesbian phallus. Based on its imaginary aspect between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, the lesbian phallus unintentionally deconstructs the demarcation between them: "if the phallus is an imaginary effect, a wishful transfiguration, then it is not merely the *symbolic* status of the phallus that is called into question, but the very distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary" (*Bodies That Matter* 79, Butler's emphasis). The first category of Butler's deconstruction and one of two types of Derrida's look like demonstrative and apparently non-historic for logical-formal paradoxes, but, on the other hand, both the second and the other seem to be more historic or more anamnestic and a product of reading of texts and of meticulous and genealogical interpretations (Derrida, *Force de loi* 48).⁽⁷⁾ The lesbian phallus is a graft onto the two types each other. It is the projection of something prohibited on a crack of the system and the identification with it, but, at the same time, a form

of erosion and haunting of something genealogical partly outside castration: “what is excluded from the body for the body’s boundary to form” “haunts that boundary as an internal ghost of sorts, the incorporation of loss as melancholia” (*Bodies That Matter* 65).

Lacanian theory of the *jouissance féminine* should be parallel to the theory of the deconstruction based on “the incommensurability of the imaginary and the symbolic.” Although Lacan denies that the phallus is either an organ or an imaginary effect as demanded just on the stage of the Imaginary (*Écrits* 690), yet lesbians imaginarily connect the phallus with penis, cite and steal the phallus of which the morphological scheme is marked as masculine. Consequently, “if the lesbian can have and be the phallus at the same time (as Lacan’s separation of the phallus from the penis must imply), then the facticity of the body and related notions about what a body can and can’t do are subjected to ‘an aggressive reterritorialization’ ...” (Kirby 61). The phallus as the transcendental signifier signifying an absence is genealogically and thus morphologically deconstructed on its imaginary aspect: the phallus as the absent signifier after Lacan’s separation of the phallus from penis is morphologically and thus imaginarily reterritorialized and shaped into a mimic penis again. The phallus as intangible pillar suspending Kantian-structuralist cognitive framework at meta-level is deconstructed into a tangible penis as matter at the object level. The conception of lesbian phallus is naturally based on the anamnestic and morphological, and thus the imaginary connection between the phallus and a penis, which reduces to a penis the transcendence of phallus that is the only exception. The imaginary reterritorialization of lesbian phallus that deviates from phallogocentrism is not only phallic, but also non-phallic, which should be theoretically equivalent with the doubleness between $\mathcal{L}a \rightarrow \Phi$ and $\mathcal{L}a \rightarrow S(\mathcal{A})$. “The feminine subject’s ‘other’ relation to the Other correlates with a *jouissance* ‘beyond’ the phallus, a *jouissance* that belongs to that part of the Other that is not covered by the fantasy of the ‘One’—that is, the fantasy sustained by the positing of the phallic exception” (Barnard 172). Without the constitutive illusion of the phallic exception as limit, *the Symbolic becomes*, in a sense, *imaginary*. Azuma also supplementarily suggests the possibility of the analogy

between the *jouissance féminine* and the deconstruction that is more historic or anamnestic and a product of meticulous and genealogical interpretations (121).

It should be particularly significant to realize the analogy between the lesbian phallus and the *jouissance féminine*, because, if recognized, then the possibilities and the limitations of Butler's critical strategies revealed by her missing of the *jouissance féminine* should become still more obvious. The non-phallic and phallic imaginary reterritorialization of the lesbian phallus is doubled between $\mathcal{L}a \rightarrow S(\mathbf{A})$ and $\mathcal{L}a \rightarrow \Phi$ and thus the deviation from and the excess over normal and rigid cognitive framework of the Symbolic. Since the deconstructive operation of lesbian phallus is morphological, genealogical, and sometimes anamnestic, it necessarily involves a trace of the past, a token of the undeveloped, or the remainder. It can be degeneration but at the same time transformation in a way, and even possess an attribute of neoteny: "... *au-delà du phallus. Ce serait mignon, ça*" "...beyond the phallus." That would be cute' (Lacan, *Encore* 69, Lacan's emphasis; *On Feminine Sexuality* 74). The adjective of "cute" would be odd for identity politics, as well as phallogocentrism, for it cannot be a sign of lack or of prohibition, but of surplus. Despite Lacan's abrupt phrase, however, it should not be beyond identity politics, but rather this side of it, because cuteness cannot be an attribute of transcendence, but of degeneration and transformation, or neoteny.

Conclusion

The reason why Butler almost disregards Lacanian *jouissance féminine* must be due to her own theoretical tendency: she would project the identity of alienated minority on one crack of the Symbolic, which could eventually result in new identity politics. By contrast, the *jouissance féminine* does not only consist in prohibition or lack, which she considers as phallogocentrism and tries to deconstruct for recognition, but also surplus. Her deconstructive strategies, however, can be categorized into some types and sometimes doubled between them, so that one of them can be unexpectedly congruous with the *jouissance féminine*. Compared with the congruence, the

significance of her disregard should become contrastively much clearer. The possibilities and the limitations of her strategies would need discussing in more detail.

Notes

- (1) Cf. the citation on this essay from page 256 of *Bodies That Matter*.
- (2) In *Bodies That Matter*, one of her chief theoretical works, she concentrates mostly on Lacanian psychoanalysis; thus, it should be strategically effective in the pursuit of this essay's theme to mainly deal with the book.
- (3) See, for example, Jagger 137.
- (4) It may be one of the reasons for Butler's disregard of the *jouissance féminine* that it can be associated with "sexual difference" (cf. Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 152–53). Sexual difference, according to her, is not biological, but cultural. Since, in contrast, Lacanian theory that regards sex to be the only basis is biological determinism, but, at the same time, the tautology between sex and language, it is theoretically wrong. The tautological bind nevertheless cannot be a theoretical fault, because it would be reductionism or dualism in the problem of mind and body to regard the tautology as a theoretical defect.
- (5) As the doubleness is partly in excess of the range of castration, the *jouissance féminine* can be *intellectually* unknown even to woman herself (Lacan, *Encore* 69), and thus understood to be intrinsically related with the Real. Slavoj Žižek says that sexual difference, or "formulas of sexuation," is in no way "real" in the sense of some pre-existing external substantial Entity beyond the grasp of symbolization: precisely as real, sexual difference is *absolutely internal* to the Symbolic—it is its point of inherent failure" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 120, Žižek's emphasis). Since the *jouissance féminine* belongs to the part of the Other not covered by the fantasy of the phallic exception, "without the constitutive illusion of the phallic exception as limit, the *symbolic becomes*, in a sense, *real*" (Barnard 179, original emphasis). This would be one of the reasons why Butler almost disregards the *jouissance féminine*. She disputes sexual difference and the Real itself, because Lacanian School regards them as the foreclosure prior to the social that is the condition of emergence of subject and traumatic, as

purely formal, unnamable, and “quasi-transcendental” (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, 136–58, 263–80; Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 187–222). Yet, if the *jouissance féminine* that is a formula of sexuation does not only belong to the Real, but also to *the Imaginary* that is the basis of performativity, should not Butler have disregarded it?

(6) See, for instance, the citation on this essay from page 97 of *Bodies That Matter*.

(7) See, for example, Azuma 213–335.

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