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Amber Jamilla Musser

Washington University in St Louis, amusser@wustl.edu

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Masochism: A Queer Subjectivity?

Amber Musser

[1] Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* elaborates what may be called a queer subjectivity. Characterized by non-essential, performative identity, her theory has been criticized because, according to its critics, it does not give the subject political agency. Liberal theorists, such as Seyla Benhabib, have been particularly concerned with the political effects of this form of subjectivity on already marginalized social groups while other theorists, such as Susan Stryker and Ed Cohen, have articulated concern that the theory does not sufficiently account for embodiment, affect, and identity. [1] This essay brings Deleuze's theory of masochism in dialogue with Butler's theories of subjectivity in an attempt to reformulate the notion of queer subjectivity in light of these criticisms.

[2] Butler's subject's formation in submission facilitates comparisons to Deleuze's masochist; Deleuze's elaborations on power allow for new perspectives on agency for Butler's subject while his insights into masochism's sociality challenge the centrality of the individual in Butler's theory of subjectivity. With an eye toward Deleuzian masochism, a revised version of Butler's theory of subjectivity begins to account for a more social, erotic, embodied *queer* subject.

[3] Masochism, as Deleuze explores it, is entirely separate from sadism. Deleuze's masochist is a subject, most often male, who disavows the Law of the Father and attempts to recreate the pre-Oedipal maternal world by enlisting a cold, cruel woman to dominate. In Deleuze's analysis, the masochist oscillates between submission and domination, rendering reality (and binaries) absurd in favour of fantasy. The masochist uses his/her power to simulate powerlessness through the contract, which simulates, but cannot replace the law. The fantasy of a relation of absolute submission is approximated by the fetishistic reiteration of objects that symbolize domination (such as fur, high heels, and whips) and disavowal of his or her agency. The masochist receives pleasure from the material symbols of submission while continually producing desire for the impossible—absolute submission.

[4] Deleuze's masochist cannot be thought as a singular entity—s/he requires a symbolic dominator to be complicit in the illusion of powerlessness. Yet, this dominant, gendered female because of her part in the psychoanalytic return to the maternal and its affiliated heterosexual matrix of desire, loses the potential for autonomy and separate desire. [2] As a result, the masochist and his/her dominant *only* exist in their interrelation, neither can be thought as individuals.

[5] The masochist/dominant intersubjective complex produces fantasies of the masochist as entirely submissive and the dominant as possessing complete control. However, the masochist/dominant's mutual dependence makes this fantasy of a power binary unattainable, but this impossibility is camouflaged by the strategic deployment of disavowal and repetition. Disavowal figures in the denial of the masochist's initiative in the recruitment of the dominant and the formation of the masochist/dominant complex. Repetition, meanwhile, obfuscates the fantasies' impossibility, by confusing them with reality.

[6] The continual deferral of submission increases the flow of desire between/among the masochist/dominant, which allows the masochist/dominant to come closer to becoming a Body without Organs, a process discussed more extensively by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* and *Mille Plateaux*. The Body without Organs is the total dismantlement of organization including capitalism in favour of flows of desire and sociality. The masochist/dominant complex has the potential to reach this plane of immanence through its disruption of founding psychoanalytic principles such as the Oedipal complex, the pleasure principle, and the death drive. The masochist/dominant's embodied destabilization of these principles marks the masochist/dominant as a sort of queer subject characterized by deterritorialized desire, that is to say desire that is not organized by capitalism.

[7] While Butler's queering of psychoanalysis in *Gender Trouble* allows for a rereading of the gender dynamics of the Deleuzian masochist, his analyses of the masochist and masochistic agency retain relevance when applied to Butler's formulations of subjectivity. [3] Both Butler's subject and the masochist rely on similar strategies, namely repetition, materiality, and disavowal, but corporeality, desire, and intersubjectivity, the essential components of the masochist/dominant complex, are nearly omitted in Butler's rendering of subjectivity. Accounting for this difference facilitates comparisons between the two and enables alternative readings of Butler's theory of subjectivity.

[8] Butler situates the subject at the intersection of power and submission, drawing on some of the characteristics masochism exploits, namely disavowal and reiteration, as fundamental characteristics of subjection. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler links subjection with submission: "'subjection' signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject." [4] The subject depends on subordination to maintain coherence. Butler's subject, however, is continually on the verge of dissolution due to repetition and desire. As Butler writes, "A vexation of desire, one that proves crucial to subjection, implies that for the subject to persist, the subject must thwart its own desire... A subject turned against itself (its desire) appears, on this model, to be a condition of the persistence of the subject." [5] The subject's coherence is maintained by subordination and its twin, disavowal.

[9] In preserving the subject, subordination creates the effect of autonomy and conscience: "if the effect of autonomy is conditioned by subordination and that founding subordination or dependency is rigorously repressed, the subject emerges in tandem with the unconscious." [6] The importance of subordination must be denied in order to protect the subject's belief in his/her autonomy. Butler's model requires the subject to disavow its subordination: "'I' emerges upon the condition that it deny its formation in dependency, the condition of its own possibility," but the 'I' is "threatened with disruption precisely by this denial." [7] This disavowal estranges the subject from itself, but it cannot erase its masochistic founding moment, which continually threatens to recur and dissolve autonomy.

[10] Disavowal, which Butler frames as passionate attachment, is central to the formation of the subject because it hides the debt owed to subordination. The subject is not merely constituted through subordination, but equally dependent and repulsed by this subordination, just as the masochist is dependent and repulsed by his agency. The stronger the disavowal, the more dependent and attached the subject becomes to the idea of its coherence and power. This is a precarious relation, one that the guise of conscience helps maintain through its practices of self-regulation. [8] Instead of viewing social norms as externally imposed, conscience produces a desire in the subject for these norms. This desire is akin to the Deleuzian masochist's desire to submit. For Butler this psychic subjection "does not simply reflect or represent broader relations of social power even as it remains importantly tied to them... it is the means by which a subject becomes an object for itself, reflecting on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive." [9] This "doubling back of desire" culminates in a desire for subjection, which inducts the subject to law through reflexive turning. This "topological inauguration of the subject" is made possible by conscience.

[11] Subordination's surreptitious tactics, including disavowal, allow for the illusion of autonomy while the subject's desire for coherence and its continual inability to make these conditions manifest continually reveals the fallacy of coherence and stability. While the masochist attempts to become unorganized and incoherent, Butler's subject is "passionately attached" to its subjectivity/subordination and through this illusion of coherence preserves a sense of autonomous individuality. [10]

[12] Butler's subject, formed in submission and attached to its subordination problematizes traditional notions of agency, which rely on the aforementioned autonomous individual. When these ideas of agency are applied to Butler's subject, it can appear devoid of agency because its formation in subordination seems to preclude any notion of autonomy. Masochism illustrates the potential for agency in subordination, a potential that Butler draws on to problematize conventional notions of agency. By arguing that subordination does not foreclose the possibility of agency, Butler aligns her subject with the masochist, whose formation requires the mobilization of

agency/power to create the condition of powerlessness. The pervasiveness of power explains this agency: "Power precedes the subject but because power is not intact prior to the subject, the appearance of its priority disappears as power acts on the subject, and the subject is inaugurated (and derived) through this temporal reversal in the horizon of power. As the agency of the subject, power assumes its present temporal dimension."

[11] In this formulation of agency, Butler resists the notion that submission and even attachment to that submission is equivalent to a lack of power. Butler suggests that agency exists because power exists and that subordination is the condition for subjectivity hence agency, an idea that resonates with Deleuze's idea of agency in masochism. While Deleuze simply posits masochistic agency without explaining it, Butler seeks to redefine the idea of agency, bringing attention to gaps in traditional definitions, specifically the reliance on a coherent, stable identity. Agency, for Butler, is inextricable from her notion of subjectification, which is akin to masochism in its creation of subjects without essential identities and founded in flows of power.

[13] The tension between the masochist's desire to abandon subjectivity and Butler's subject's desire to maintain it produces varied readings on identity as well as agency. Aside from autonomy, Butler's subject also desires a coherent identity; in *Gender Trouble*, Butler examines the production of gender as a fundamental part of this composed identity. In her analysis, the performance of gender is a process similar to that of subjectification and Deleuzian becoming-masochist. The illusion of an inner gender core is maintained through a disavowal of its origin while reiteration sediments (while also threatening to disrupt) gender norms by creating the illusion of an inner gender core.

[14] While Butler highlights the social context required to endow a subject's performance with significance, Deleuze's masochist is created in the intersubjective space between the dominant and the submissive as opposed to within a larger social context. Masochism can be thought as reciprocity dependent on local, contingent differences where the intersubjective relation takes precedence to the individual. The crucial exchanges between the dominant and submissive, which anchor masochistic notions of agency are based on the differences assigned in their contract and articulated in their performance, which in turn produces their identities. The performative aspect of masochism depends on the locality of *perception* between performers. Beyond the broader notion of context, whereby certain acts take on meaning because of their location, perception, which operates on a more intimate level between performers, is significant because it creates the identities of the performers, even as they create the performance. In the ambiguous terrain between reality and fantasy, the self is figured as a potential, not an identity because identity relies on interaction from others (the audience and the other performers) in the performative exchange. Both the dominant and submissive anticipate the reaction and action of the other, altering their performances and identities accordingly. This suggests that identities are contingent and fluid, relying on difference and requiring intersubjectivity for their creation and manipulation. Through this, we gain an understanding of becoming as a continuous social process that is equally dependent on relations with others and regulatory norms.

[15] Yet this process of becoming is also embodied, which points to another key difference between Deleuze's masochist and Butler's subject. Utilizing the space constituted by the ambiguity of the performance of masochism, the flesh becomes a place of respite, the impossible location of non-identity. It is part of the masochist's coherence as well as the site of its dissolution. The flesh in masochism is everything; it grounds the process of becoming and allows the masochist to relinquish identity, but remain in existence. Masochism shows the flesh to be a valuable commodity in and of itself, not something excluded by discourse, but a necessary active part of subjectivity. This understanding of flesh as offering a potentially new mechanism for understanding the self resonates with the call for embodiment issued in *Transgender Studies*. Susan Stryker's comments on her transsexuality can be likened to those of the masochist: "By denaturalizing and thus deprivileging nontransgender practices of embodiment and identification, and by simultaneously enacting a new narrative of the wedding of self and flesh, I intended to create new territories, both analytic and material, for a critically refigured transsexual practice." [12] Stryker's emphasis on the flesh's simultaneous malleability and continuity highlights its importance in formations of subjectivity. Transgender formations of subjectivity center on the flesh because it "enables desire to take shape and find its aim" through the manipulation of gender identities. [13]

Masochism illustrates another type of marriage between self, flesh, and desire; the masochist requires both flesh and desire to attempt a loss/ refinding of self. This embodied eroticism locates desire and flesh at central nodes in the practice of masochism and the agency of the masochist.

[16] The continuities and differences between Deleuze and Butler's portraits of subordination provide fertile ground for expanding notions of queer subjectivity. While Deleuze's masochist/dominant complex is but one type of queer subject, linking it with Butler opens other possibilities for understanding subjectivity. Building on Deleuze's vision of masochism, these new subjects are grounded in terms of desire, flesh and context, but they are not limited to the specific practice of masochism. Deleuze's theory of masochism offers a way to read Butler's theory of subjectivity as enabling empowered, embodied, erotic, and fluid subjects. These emerging social subjects, in turn, lay the groundwork for both a queer way of relating and potentially a queer ethics.

Notes

[1] Seyla Benhabib, 'Feminism and Postmodernism' in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York; London: Routledge, 1995).

[2] The absence of a male dominant speaks to another issue in Deleuze, namely the lack of homosexual masochistic relations between men. Deleuze's silence on this issue articulates a loud 'hommo-sexuality,' whereby feminine desire becomes a conduit for homosexual exchange between men but lacks agency of its own. Deleuze seems to offer a model of power and agency, which has a great deal of potential for feminism, but his model remains bounded by the particularities of gendered identities.

[3] Although Deleuze's model contains the potential for a female masochist, the dominant is always figured as female because of her link with the Oedipal mother. Lynda Hart offers a revised model of masochism with particular attention to issues of gender and sexuality in her text *Between the Body and the Flesh*. Hart analyzes masochism as a non-gendered practice, which opens the possibility of female-female, male-male relationships between the masochist and dominant and male dominants with female masochists. Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sodomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[4] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.

[5] Ibid. 9.

[6] Ibid. 7.

[7] Ibid. 10.

[8] For more on practices of the self see Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality, Vol 3*. Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

[9] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 22.

[10] Ibid. 9.

[11] Ibid. 14.

[12] Susan Stryker, "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10.2 (2004): 212-215.

(13) *ibid.*

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