

CONCLUSION

Is it possible for human subjects to appropriate sexual identities at will by exercising the free application of their own volition? The theoretical engagements and its concomitant political possibilities argued in the previous chapters broaden the scope of adopting variant assignments of sexual and political identity in the changing social and cultural contexts in specific historical conditions. Newer communicational technologies like the Internet indeed amplify the extent of this engagement with corporeal modification to appropriate different sexual identities, and, in general, to proliferate the possibilities of adopting various subject formations by creating virtual identities and mobilising subjects with similar or dissimilar gender assignments. The advancement in cyber technologies also allow for strategic fragmentations that are celebratory and political in nature, dissolving imagined boundaries of cultures, nations, and countries, paving the way for a fluidity in social and cultural relationships that transcend diffuse power structures. The social and political context of postmodernity has set the stage for the adoption of fluid sexual identities. The modern world is characterised by a certain form of fluidity in social relations which is helped by the fragmentation of various sexual sub-cultures. The preponderance of agony aunt columns related to sexual problems in the Internet has thrown up some fascinating examples in the context of adopting various identities. Here, for example, is a problem letter, quite obviously a first world problem, submitted to the advice column of the website *www.thestranger.com* on 7 November, 2007, run by Dan Savage, the American gay author of *Skipping Towards Gomorrah*:¹ ‘For the past 15 years, I’ve identified as bisexual: I’ve been in monogamous relationships with men and women. I married a wonderful guy a few years ago. However, I recently realised that I identified as gay. I’ve talked to my husband about this, and he’s okay with it. I decided to stay

with him and remain monogamous. We have a great relationship — and great sex. We left open the possibility of me taking a female lover in the future, if needed. For now, I'm happy with him. I flirt with girls, we talk openly about my preferences, but I haven't had sex with a woman since before I married him. And I'm okay with that. So, here's my dilemma: is it right to call myself a lesbian if I'm married to (and sexually involved with) a man? I hesitate to stay with the 'bi' label, since I have no interest in other men. Can I call myself a lesbian even though I'm not sleeping with women?'²

Even in the age of the Internet, and the rapid shrinking of the world as a global village through a contested homogenisation of social and cultural norms, these ideas seem, in culture-specific locations, and in specific historical conditionings, fairly and absurdly utopian. This work strategically uses Judith Butler's theoretical concept of the performative nature of doing one's gender, and Foucault's conception of the emergence of discordant events that challenge the existing hegemonic power in his analysis of discourse, to put forward an idea of flawed bodies that is not *entirely* determined by the regulatory regimes, and, therefore, retains the possibility of creating incoherence within the very structures of heteronormativity that engender the attainability and signifiability of these variant corporealities. Foucault anticipates the possibility of a particular event in a genealogical enquiry that exceeds its causes and reverses the relationships of forces, so that the event can appropriate the denunciations to eventually turn them against the powers that constitute the very possibility of the event. This discordant emergence of the event, as he mentions in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', makes possible the ingress of the masked other.³ Butler conceives of performativity as the enactment of a set of acts; some of them are deviations of the pre-assigned script that mark them as subversive acts that spill over and overflow, unsettling and confusing the hegemonic domination through their capacity to disrupt and disorganise the existing repressive norms and regulations in order to reorganise and reconfigure the relationships of forces. Utilising these

two theoretical conceptions, one can envisage the decisive manifestations of particular events, those subversive performativities that produce the flawed bodies that refuse to conform to the regulations set up by a discursive hegemonic power. But, can this specific emergence of such events be considered as rebellions, emancipatory insurrections that have the power to overthrow the dominant hegemony? To a certain extent, the answer could be affirmative, politically speaking, as it could, with reiterative repetition congealing into a flawed manifestation of corporeality that eventually solidifies into a normative assignation, become a counterforce, a certain kind of reverse discourse, that challenges the dominant powers. But it can only become another force in the endless play of forces. Thus, the flawed body has the potential to disrupt the normative structure by proliferating the configurations of corporeal attributes and assignations, while moving beyond the rigid binaries of structural limitations set up by dominating juridical discourses, and, in time, has the capacity, theoretically and politically, to overturn the regulatory regimes. But, again, it is not a liberatory potential, since liberation cannot be seen in an exterior correlation with the perpetual play of relationships between the forces, where newer configurations of forces emerge and re-emerge, unite, break up, and posit enduring and everlasting challenge to other forces.

Foucault has introduced the term ‘technology’ to denote the discursive instruments with which intelligible knowledge of social and cultural realities and the functional justification of various social and cultural institutions are constructed, and his work focuses on the delineation of complex relationships that exist between the technologies of discursive formations of sexuality, power, and the body. In an essay written shortly before his death, Foucault referred to the variety of ways knowledge is discursively produced in specific cultures, in specific contexts, and in specific historical periods.⁴ There is, for example, the technology of production of knowledge that permits the fabrication, transformation, and manipulation of discrete objects; there is also the technology of sign systems that allows, and limits, the functional exchange

and interpretation of signs, symbols, meanings, and signification; and then there is the technology of power that determines the behaviours and attitudes of discrete individuals to allocate them in different subject positions for domination, or subjecting them to comply with the regulatory mechanism of hegemonic power. And, finally, there is the technology of the self that, to a certain extent, permits the corporeal body through certain transformational and manipulative operations or processes effecting on the very physicality of the bodies to allow for a change in the corporeality, to allow for certain changes in ways of thoughts and conducts, in short, to forge a certain sense of happiness and well-beings through these operations of transformations, to attain certain kinds of what Foucault calls ‘purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’. These technologies do not have univocal hegemonic power, and they do not function separately; instead, they create a network of force relations that always aim for domination, enmeshing the body in their powerful embrace of jurisdiction.

Judith Butler’s theoretical formulation of the constructional aspects of gender as performative enactments of parodic acts has broadened and supplemented the theoretical debates on gender criticism beyond the binary of the biological body and culturally inscribed gender, past the notion of unproblematic cultural connotations on an inert, willing, and malleable body to receive the marks and traces of cultural assignments, and, thus, her problematisation of gendered subjectivity, agency, and gendered identity has opened up newer directions for gender criticism, queer politics, and philosophy. Engagement with the theoretical notions of discourse, the corporeality of the body within discourse, the limited extent of subversive parodic performativity that allows an agency which is conceived strategically and politically to challenge the hegemonic dominance of heteronormativity however limited its latitude of intervention might be, gives rise to the question that to what extent it is really possible and worthwhile to conceptualise a will to theory that has the power of intervention and intercession to subvert the hegemonic domination in such a limited and restricted fashion,

because liberation or emancipation from within the grid of interlocking discourses is not an option considering the impossibility of these counterforces acting against dominating hegemonies from a position of exteriority. As Sara Salih points out, pondering on the question of the eventual willy-nilly appropriation of any subversion within a dominating discourse, leaving *only* the theoretical and political option of exposing the constructional nature of the foundational categories of gender, body, sexuality, agency, and identity: ‘Should people currently living on the margins of social structures campaign for assimilation or should they continue to exist in a more critical and oblique, if a necessarily more painful, relation to the institutions by which they are rejected but simultaneously constituted?’⁵

The abstract critical theories that try to problematise the notions of gender, body, and sexuality have always been situated with a paradoxical and somewhat oppositional relationship to the material realities of the real world. But however abstract and detached these critical theories might seem to be, they must come to terms to a more practical engagement with the social, cultural, and political realities around us. The envisioning of an agency and locating it within the relational aspects of flawed subjectivities with an overt political aim to destabilise the oppressive political domination invested with power for a radical intervention, however rudimentary and restricted in its scope within hegemonic heteronormativity it seems to be, might point a way out of this all-pervasive, powerful, and endless network of force fields by suggesting that, even though sex, gender, sexuality, and the body are discursively constructed, they are not *entirely* determined by discourses. The ab-normality imposed by hegemonic regulations on the corporeal body to dis-figure it and mark it as a flawed body does not preclude the theoretical and political possibilities of performative enactments of subversive acts, and, through a gradual accretion of such perverse *acts*, in time, in different cultural and social contexts, the flawed bodies can generate the will to theory and the political will to creatively ratify a counterdiscourse that can challenge the contemporary hegemonic domination. Thus,

the subjected body can performatively and creatively enact, within the relations of competing force fields, subversive acts and deeds that not only dissolve restrictive binary formations but also proliferate the possibilities of appropriating resistive and combative subject positions to forge newer forms of relationships to be able to disrupt, and eventually exercise a certain extent of manageability about, the discursive regulations and norms of hegemonic formations. As Foucault pointed out in an interview, ‘We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation [...] [s]ex is not a fatality: it’s a possibility for creative life’.⁶ He conceives of power relations, as opposed to a juridical model of power, as a productive form of relationship. Power is omnipresent, and where there is power there is also resistance, and this resistance is never in a position of exteriority vis-à-vis power. In other words, the subjected bodies within an oppressive hegemonic regime are always in a strategic relationship with existing modes of dominating power. Thus, there are always possibilities to circumvent the strategic relations, to transform those relations. ‘We cannot jump *outside* the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it [...] if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations [...] [s]o resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance [...] [it] is the main word, *the key word*, in this dynamic’ (p.167). Resistance, therefore, is not a negation of domination, but a creative engagement to change the oppressive structure of regulatory regimes, and this creative force of resistance is generated within the relationships of the modes of power that constitutes us and incorporates us.

NOTES

1. Dan Savage, *Skipping Towards Gomorrah: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Pursuit of Happiness in America* (New York: Plume, 2002)
2. Quoted in Véronique Mottier, *Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 124
3. Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Aesthetics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984, Volume 2*, ed. James D Faubion (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 380-381
4. Michel Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self', in *Technologies of the Self, A Seminar With Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 16-49
5. Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 138
6. Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity', in *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984, Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 163. B Gallagher and A Wilson conducted the interview in June 1982 in Toronto that appeared in *The Advocate* 400 (7 August, 1984), pp. 26-30 and 58