

On “Glass Snakes,” White Moral Responsibility, and Agency Under Complicity

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Where do we take our sit-ins when the WHITES ONLY signs come down, when Kresge closes its lunch counter and moves out of town, when power doesn't live where it used to anymore? What happens when the contemporary configuration of power doesn't have an address: when dogs and water hoses are traded in for numbers and tests; when gatekeepers are automated, and exclusion is familiar; when ideas are red-lined, and people are warehoused?¹

Matthew Silliman begins his review of Lawrence Blum's thought-provoking book, *“I Am Not a Racist, But...”: The Moral Quandary of Race*, with an illuminating personal account. Silliman, a white philosopher, recounts how he was chatting with an African-American man at a reception and the thought did not immediately occur to him that man before him could be, and *in fact* was, a well-known and distinguished scholar.² Documented reports of such unconscious everyday racism abound.³ A new African American graduate student walked into the first day of my course irate and disturbed because a white peer asked him whether he was pursuing a master's degree (but he was not asked whether he was pursuing a doctorate, which, *in fact*, he was). The white students in my class had difficulty understanding how such an “innocent” question could be so upsetting.

When W.E.B. Du Bois argued in the early 1900s that race is a sociohistorical concept, it was a blatant and (allegedly) scientifically supported racism that his social constructivist claim was attempting to renounce. Today, a new type of racism operates — one whose perpetrators are not as easily detected but whose real life effects are just as lethal. Denials of complicity in this new type of racism are the major concern of Barbara Houston's 2002 Philosophy of Education Society presidential address.⁴ Houston indicts the traditional conception of moral responsibility for encouraging the “moral lethargy of decent people” because it is too centered on individual intentions, backward-looking, and essentially concerned with attributions of moral accountability. The following journal entry of one of my student's illustrates Houston's characterization: “In any situation you cannot be held responsible for something that you did not do. Even on the smallest scale, if you don't think that you've done anything wrong, *then you will be reluctant to change or to try and examine the problem.*”

Sandra Bartky refers to such denials as “unwillingness to acknowledge complicity in racism.”⁵ Yet this unwillingness is not just personal lethargy or failure. In their ethnographic study of how discourses of whiteness operate in the classroom, Kathy Hytten and John Warren observe that the rhetorical strategies their students performed were culturally sanctioned discourses of evasions; “these discourses... were not original — that is, they are already available, already common forms of asserting dominance.”⁶ My student has no reason to question or doubt the veracity of his claims to innocence since society, reflected in his conception of moral

responsibility, tells him that "he has done nothing wrong." Moreover, it is exactly my student's sense of moral responsibility, his desire to be "good" and his self-certainty about how to be good, that authorizes his refusal to contemplate the *possibility* of complicity. The traditional conception of moral responsibility can ironically shut down the openness necessary to attend to the ways in which well-intentioned white people support and perpetuate oppression.

Houston suggests a forward-looking conception of moral responsibility that highlights "taking responsibility" as an antidote for this "moral lethargy of decent people." Essential to this forward sense of moral responsibility is a "double reflection" that requires a "rethinking of the structures within which one finds oneself, reevaluating them in such a way that one's thinking leads to action."⁷ Dwight Boyd, in his response to Houston, is not as sanguine.⁸ Not only must conceptions of moral responsibility be altered, according to Boyd, but the notion of the subject upon which it is grounded must shift as well. Boyd argues that the "liberal individual," whose characteristic feature of transcendence from social contingency grounds the traditional conception of moral responsibility and encourages denials of complicity, may sneakily return in Houston's recommendations.

Boyd compares the resilience of the liberal conception of self to a glass snake. When threatened, the glass snake breaks into many pieces and feigns death, but it then regenerates when the predator departs the scene. In opposition to the "liberal subject," Boyd introduces a conception of the subject that he refers to as "groupals." "Groupals" are entities that "express themselves existentially *not* via their capacity to transcend their embeddedness in a collectivity (or its "identity"), but, rather, via their enactment of how particular collectivities are established and maintained vis-à-vis others and what this relationship accomplishes in the world, namely, a collective project of oppression." In this conception of subjectivity, subjects are "essentially interchangeable in their active being in the world" and "action is achieved unavoidably by the proxy agency of this interchangeability."⁹

In underscoring that our social location implicates us regardless of our individual intentions or awareness, that "our mobs are always with us," Boyd's argument fills an urgent need.¹⁰ Elsewhere Boyd acknowledges that the resilience of the "liberal individual" is partly due to the fact that this perspective offers us "the only viable model of agency and responsibility."¹¹ Boyd cautions that the perspective of the "liberal individual" is not the "default" position because this allows the return of the glass snake. Boyd leaves us with the dilemma of critiquing something that, as Gayatri Spivak notes, "is extremely useful, something without which we cannot do anything."¹²

Against this background, this essay explores the conceptions of the subject and agency that social justice educators should promote. If subjectivity is a product of our embeddedness in social collectivities in which individual intention is ineffective, how are agents able to possess the necessary freedom that grounds agency? Is there a way of articulating "agency under complicity" that does not presume a transcendental subject but that also does not fall prey to social determinism? Must

we retain some aspect of the modernist subject in order to preserve agency? Must we choose between a conception of the subject that does not conceal complicity and one that sacrifices agency?

A good place to begin to examine the tensions that Boyd illuminates is the debate between Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler¹³ about the implications of radical social constructivism for conceptions of agency. Despite both rejecting the transcendental subject of Enlightenment theory, Benhabib and Butler hold notably different views of the subject and agency. Butler charges Benhabib with retaining a sense of the modernist subject that she claims to reject. Benhabib charges Butler with failing to provide a viable or coherent notion of agency in which to ground feminist praxis. Contrasting these different accounts may shed some light on the type of moral responsibility that can ground social justice education.

THE BENHABIB/BUTLER CONTROVERSY

Postmodern deconstruction and some versions of feminism have focused on the displacement of the modernist, Enlightenment subject and, in its place, have embraced the constituted subject. In the early 1990s, however, some feminist theorists found themselves questioning whether postmodernism was an ally of feminism because the advocacy of a thoroughly discursive subject obviated the category of “woman” upon which feminist praxis is thought to depend. While historicizing the subject has helped feminists to explain how patriarchy constructs marginalized identities, it has also put the unitary concept of womanhood in doubt. Moreover, some feminist theorists question whether the discursively constituted subject is so determined that it cannot be an agent.

Benhabib distinguishes between weak and strong versions of the “death of the subject,” a hallmark concept in postmodern thought. In the weak version, the subject is situated “in the context of various social, linguistic, and discursive practices” but remains capable of intentional action and autonomy. In the strong version, by contrast,

“Man is forever caught in the web of fictive meaning, in chains of signification, *in which the subject is merely another position in language.*” The subject thus dissolves into the chain of significations of which it was supposed to be the initiator. Along with the dissolution of the subject into yet “another position in language” disappear of course concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity, and autonomy. The subject that is but another position in language can no longer master and create that distance between itself and the chain of signification in which it is immersed such that it can reflect upon them and creatively alter them.¹⁴

Benhabib concludes that feminists should not embrace the strong version of postmodernism, for it forfeits the possibility of an emancipated subject. She insists upon a *situated*, not *constituted*, subject that is not merely a passive product of regulatory norms but one for which autonomy, choice, and self-determination are possible. Agency, for Benhabib, implies that we are “not merely extensions of our histories, that vis-à-vis our own stories we are in the position of author and character at once.”¹⁵ While Benhabib concurs with the postmodern rejection of the transcendental subject and acknowledges that subjects are situated in the context of social and linguistic practices, she is adamant that at the core of this subject is a minimalist

return of the ahistorical, transcendental subject that must be retained for autonomy and agency.

For Butler, subjectivity is *thoroughly* discursive. Gender identities are unavoidably dependent on a “language we never made” and actualized through a “regulated process of repetition.”¹⁶ Her theory of performativity explicates the ways in which the reiteration of gender norms produces, over time, the *appearance* of a substance, an identity that solidifies and gives the impression that it is a natural expression of particular bodies. Performativity produces an identity (a subject) that the citations name (for example, “woman”). Performativity, moreover, is not voluntaristic but a forced reiteration of norms that brings into being or enacts gender identity upon the body. These performative acts are not scripts executed by a detached actor; they are constitutive constraints without which we could not exist as subjects who think, live, and make sense of the world. Having subject status thus depends on complying with and participating in dominant norms and conventions. As such, social norms are both enabling and constraining: they enable a subject to speak insofar as they constrain the subject as a subject.

Furthermore, the collateral effects of recitation not only sustain the very norms that bring the subject into being, but they also constitute abject others. At the same time that citation produces what is intelligible, it also constructs and forecloses what is unintelligible and, in doing so, excludes other types of bodies that do not matter — abject bodies. Subject status is constituted by violent exclusions — who *we are not* constitutes the contours of our identity as intelligible subjects (*I am not that*). Abject bodies are the “constitutive outside.”¹⁷

Two features of this conception of subjectivity are particularly relevant for our discussion of white complicity and moral responsibility. First, as articulated by Edwina Barvosa-Carter, “This citational process *implicates* those who reiterate prevailing gender norms in the perpetuation of the existing gender order and its (differential) relations of power.”¹⁸ Performative acts draw upon and recite linguistic conventions that are not the effect of individual intention but, rather, are the effect of “historically sedimented linguistic intentions.”¹⁹ To cite, therefore, implicates one in the perpetuation of the norms that construct the subject as one who is. Power, for Butler, is not only what one opposes but also what one depends upon for one’s existence and “what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are.”²⁰ In her notion of subjection and performativity Butler is able to explain the simultaneous process of becoming a subject and being compelled to participate in reproducing dominant norms. Underlying both Butler’s understanding of the subject and Boyd’s conception of “groupal” is an acknowledgment that privileged identities are constituted such that they unintentionally affect how others are positioned in society, regardless of individual choice or intention.

Second, in contrast to Benhabib, for Butler the subject is constituted “all the way down.” There is no transcendental, prediscursive subject, no doer behind the deed. Rather the “doer” comes into being as a subject only through “doing” and by “doing” sustains the very norms that it depends upon for its existence as a subject. Butler rejects a prediscursive self not only because agency can be accounted for without it,

but also because she believes assuming a prediscursive self is pernicious. As David Stern explicates,

If subjects are constituted by power, then to assume the existence of subjectivity and the possession of its capacities would be to obscure the need to interrogate the political construction of the subject. It would thus close off questions about the way in which the assignment of subjectivity and agency can work to include some and exclude others, authorizing some to speak and act in ways that bind others, while denying the same privileges to others. We must, then, interrogate how we are made into subjects, and what the consequences, both welcome and unwelcome, of such a making are.²¹

Butler articulates a conception of subjectivity that avoids any reference to a prediscursive self, but she insists that this does not preclude a conception of agency because “to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined.”²² So what does agency look like for Butler?

Since for Butler there is no escape from power, agency must be found within the repetition of norms already given and through the possibility of a variation on that repetition that is opened up by discourse. Agency is to be located in the capacity for the subject to vary and subvert, rather than repeat, constituting norms. Butler posits drag and parody as examples that illustrate the subversive repetition of norms. While Benhabib (and others) maintain that Butler’s conception of agency dissolves material feminist politics into symbolic activism that does not meet the needs of actual women,²³ Butler insists that political activism must include ways of exposing norms that constitute us and, in doing so, open up possibilities for transformations in our identities. For Butler, feminist agency is to be found in resistance.

In sum, Benhabib and Butler’s conceptions of agency diverge in two important ways. First, Benhabib is concerned with choice and self-determination, and so with the possibility of autonomy and self-reflexivity. Agency is tightly connected with accountability, and one can only be accountable if one is the origin of one’s action and responsible for the consequences of one’s choices. Such a model of agency requires an intentional agent making sovereign choices from a range of available options. But to be accountable in this way requires that the subject be construed, at least in a minimal sense, as independent of the constraints to which he or she is subject. If determinism is to be avoided, there must be a space from which the subject acts but to which power cannot gain access.

Butler, in contrast, is more concerned with the question of how such *choice* is constituted, insisting as she does that nothing escapes power matrices. According to her, Benhabib’s notion of agency is guilty of misplaced focus: agency is primarily about resistance in the sense of exposing oppressive norms for what they do rather than primarily about choice. For Butler, agency is an exercise in spotting the loophole, spotting the possibility that is not among those encouraged but that still remains possible. Most of all, it is not a departure from power relations, but is rather a divergence within power relations that exposes how such relations are set up.

Second, while for Benhabib agency is a capacity of the subject, for Butler it is an effect of the subject, a consequence of the very process through which one is constituted as a subject. Agency, according to Butler, is not an attribute or power of

the subject through which one individually asserts control over external contingencies (a characterization that implies the subject has some type of exclusive ownership of action or signification). Moreover, resignification is not entered into deliberately or voluntarily; rather, subjects are compelled insofar as they are constituted as "abject" in and through relations of power. Dominant discourses, Butler maintains, are subverted only when there is "slippage" within the process of repetition.²⁴ This "slippage" occurs as the emergence of what is foreclosed or repressed by dominant discourses, and it renders resignification as accidental and unintentional, as well as unpredictable. Butler's notion of performativity has been commonly misinterpreted in this regard, but she is clear that there is no imputation of "choice" or intention behind her understanding of performativity or resignification. As Lise Nelson emphasizes, "'intention' is not within the vocabulary of performativity."²⁵

CONCLUSION

Can agency that eschews intentions, reflexivity, and purposeful action sufficiently ground radical politics? In her trenchant attack on Butler, Martha Nussbaum argues that Butler's theory cannot ground political action and, thus, does not promote social change.²⁶ Veronica Vasterling points out that Butler's conception of agency may explain how change occurs *through* subjects, but it cannot explain how change occurs *because* of subjects. In order for the subject to be not only a carrier in the process of reiteration but a potential participant in this process, Butler would have to make reference to norms by which the subject acts.²⁷ As Benhabib puts it, "social criticism of the kind required for women's struggles is not even possible without positing the legal, moral and political norms of autonomy, choice and self-determination."²⁸ Wendy Brown argues that resistance by itself "does not contain a critique, a vision, or grounds for organized collective efforts to enact... Resistance-as-politics does not raise the dilemmas of responsibility and justification entailed in 'affirming' political projects and norms."²⁹ In other words, resistance in itself is devoid of the moral framework necessary to direct political action, a critique similarly expressed by Nancy Fraser when she asks whether there can be "bad" forms of resignification?³⁰

But it is this very "direction" that concerns Butler. On the one hand, disavowals of normative positions preclude legitimate recourse to demands for justice that would guide social transformation. On the other hand, Butler is concerned that such guidance will close off the need to interrogate any political action agents presume to take.

A closer look at what she says indicates that she does not deny the use of norms or foundations in the real world; rather, she is concerned with any project that seeks to set out norms in advance of political action. Butler acknowledges the need "to set norms, to affirm aspirations, to articulate the possibilities of a more fully democratic and participatory political life," and thus admits the necessity for selective or strategic use of the concepts she critiques.³¹ For example, she does not disregard the need to strategically use the category of "women" (a category she has radically critiqued) in order to make political claims (*CF*, 49). However, Butler insists that

whenever this is necessary, we must be vigilant in ensuring that these categories always remain open and a site of contestation. In problematizing the category “woman,” Butler does not want to prevent its use to serve political ends, only its *uncritical* use. Similarly, Butler contends that her deconstruction of foundations does not do away with foundations: “Rather, the task is to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations *authorizes*, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses” (*CF*, 39). Moreover, Butler rejects the charge that her position leads to nihilistic relativism. On the contrary, the insight that complicity must always be interrogated forms “the very precondition of a politically engaged critique” (*CF*, 39).

Lise Nelson builds upon Butler’s discussion of agency by underscoring that agency should not be understood as “a discrete, internalized quality” but instead as “a disturbance in self-certitude.”³² She maintains that how real people *do* identity is an unstable and partial process that evinces “conscious action.” However, what she learns from Butler is that such “conscious action” is never transparent and must be interrogated to expose the discourses that constitute it.

It is possible then to read Butler’s discussion of agency in at least two ways: The first sees her as primarily involved in an explication of agency as resistance that has been subject to much critique. But a second way to understand her point is to see it less as a completely articulated conception of agency and more as a call for continued vigilance about the conceptions of agency we presume:³³

Inasmuch as poststructuralism offers a mode of critique that effects this contestation of the foundationalist move, it can be used as part of such a radical agenda. Note that I have said, “it can be used”: I think there are no necessary political consequences for such a theory, but only a possible political deployment. (*CF*, 41)

She further notes that “To deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term, like the subject, to reuse or redeployment that previously has not been authorized” (*CF*, 47).

If we adhere exclusively to the first reading of Butler on agency, much remains problematic and incoherent. The alternative reading (that is still connected to the first — the difference being one of emphasis), however, offers enormous insights for those involved in social justice education with a predominantly white student body. If nothing escapes power, a necessary conception of self-criticality that is often obscured by approaches to agency such as the one Benhabib advocates is uncovered. At the same time, while the attractions of traditional notions of agency might be something we cannot do without, we are called upon to ask questions about our complicity in power relations or at least to be open to considering such questions when they are posed to us.

My students would more likely understand how the white peer is implicated in sustaining the systemic oppression of people of color if they understood that through citing dominant norms, we implicate ourselves in the perpetuation of existing relations of power. Moreover, if their sense of moral responsibility were informed by a notion of the subject that avoids the transcendental subject inherent in “glass snakes,” they would more likely be open to charges of complicity and to the

interrogation of their own moral positions. Just as Butler's notions of the subject and of agency have encouraged political activists to critique their own positions, so too her ideas can inform the conception of moral agency and moral responsibility that social justice educators need to encourage and rely upon.

We urgently need a conception of moral agency that continually critiques the sense of choice that requires a transcendental subject. The point is not that we do not choose, but rather that our choices are not transparent and that we must be vigilant to ensure that our moral sensibilities do not obstruct the ways in which certain choices marginalize some while privileging others, regardless of individual intentions. If the subject is never outside of power matrices, agency is never innocent.³⁴ Similarly, moral responsibility and agency must not be perceived as "outside" of power. Butler does not explain what motivates the dominant to resist (a topic that requires further investigation), but her work furthers our understanding of the type of agency under complicity that must ground dominant group moral responsibility. The certainty that accompanies doing what we think is morally good must be always open to interrogation. Uncertainty and vigilance are indispensable arms, I submit, in the battle to keep "glass snakes" at bay.

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 2. Matthew Silliman, "Structural Racism and the Failure of Empathetic Imagination: A Comment on Lawrence Blum," *Theory and Research in Education* 1, no. 3 (2003): 303-313.
 3. Ellis Cose, *The Rage of a Privileged Class* (1993; repr., New York: Harper Collins, 1995); and Joe R. Feagan and Melvin P. Sikes, *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience* (Boston: Beacon, 1994).
 4. Barbara Houston, "Taking Responsibility," in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 1-13.
 5. Sandra Bartky, "Race, Complicity and Culpable Ignorance," in *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 151-167.
 6. Kathy Hytten and John Warren, "Engaging Whiteness: How Racial Power Gets Reified in Education," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 66.
 7. Houston, "Taking Responsibility," 10.
 8. Dwight Boyd, "Glass Snakes vs. Groupals: Who Is the Responsible Subject?" in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Fletcher, 14-18.
 9. *Ibid.*, 17.
 10. Dwight Boyd, "The Place of Locating Oneself(ves)/Myself(ves) in Doing Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 13.
 11. Dwight Boyd, "The Legacies of Liberalism and Oppressive Relations: Facing a Dilemma for the Subject of Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 33, no. 1 (2004): 20.
 12. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "In a Word," *differences* 1, no. 2 (1989): 129.
 13. Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucella Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
 14. Seyla Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance," in *Feminist Contentions*, 20.

15. *Ibid.*, 21.
16. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 26; and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
17. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.
18. Edwina Barvosa-Carter, "Strange Tempest: Agency, Poststructuralism, and the Shape of Feminist Politics to Come," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 6, nos. 1 and 2 (2001): 125 (emphasis added).
19. Judith Butler, "For a Careful Reading," in *Feminist Contentions*, 134.
20. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.
21. David Stern, "The Return of the Subject? Power, Reflexivity and Agency," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26, no. 5 (2000): 113.
22. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations," in *Feminist Contentions*, 46. This work will be cited as *CF* in the text for all subsequent references.
23. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler," *New Republic* 220, no. 8 (1999): 37–45.
24. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 30.
25. Lise Nelson, "Bodies (and Spaces) Do Matter: The Limits of Performativity," *Gender, Place and Culture* 6, no. 4 (1999): 331–353.
26. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody."
27. Veronica Vasterling, "Butler's Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical Assessment," *Hypatia* 14, no. 3 (1999): 28.
28. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 16.
29. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 49.
30. Nancy Fraser, "False Antitheses," in *Feminist Contentions*, 59–74.
31. Butler, "For a Careful Reading," 129.
32. Nelson, "Bodies (and Spaces)," 348.
33. See Nicholas C. Burbules, "Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 39–48, for a similar treatment but applied to philosophy of education in general.
34. See Jane Flax, "The End of Innocence," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 445–463. Note especially Flax's claim that "Postmodernism calls into question the belief (or hope) that there is some form of innocent knowledge to be had. This hope recurs throughout the history of Western philosophy (including much of feminist theory). While many feminists have been critical of the content of such dreams, many have also been unable to abandon them," 447.