

ARTICLE

Insubordinate Plasticity: Judith Butler and Catherine Malabou

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the relationship between *performativity*, as it appears in Judith Butler's work, and *plasticity*, as it appears in the work of Catherine Malabou. I argue that these concepts are isomorphic. Butler and Malabou both hold that resistance to contemporary forms of power, or "insubordination," is contingent on a subject's ability to become other than what it is; Butler articulates this ability in terms of performativity, and Malabou articulates it in terms of plasticity. I reveal the social-constructivist dimension of Malabou's work while also making apparent the extent to which Butler's work, contrary to her own way of conceptualizing it, and hence surprisingly and uneasily, presupposes a biologically basic capacity for change. Plasticity is this biologically basic capacity. Both thinkers affirm the idea that insubordinate forms of transformation can be impeded by the discourse that conditions what a subject can think. I suggest that this is an insight that must be heeded, even as I seek to affirm a form of plasticity beyond discourse.

Keywords: Judith Butler; Catherine Malabou; Performativity; Plasticity; Insubordination; Foucauldian Theory

Philosophers who recognize the extent to which subjectivity is formed by normalizing forces also affirm the political value of transformation: to evade the forces that shape its very desires, its hierarchy of values, its aesthetic sensibilities, its ability to conceive of its own possibilities, its capacity for pleasure, and more, the subject must become other than itself (see McWhorter 1999; Heyes 2007). It is perhaps no surprise that feminist thinkers in particular have been preoccupied with the possibility of subverting power through self-transformation. A feminine subject's most authentically experienced habits are occasionally suspect: at times, these are the effects of patriarchal power and abet the feminine subject as she incorporates herself into the patriarchal apparatus.¹ Self-abnegating behaviors, self-loathing, and the desire to aestheticize the body in certain ways—slim down, firm up, and so on—are all examples of impulses that might seem to issue from the most authentic reaches of the self, but that can also be conceived as reflections of patriarchal injunctions that function to serve patriarchal interests. There is good reason to think carefully about the forms of transformation that make it possible to overcome impulses like these.

Forms of change that make it possible to resist power are “insubordinate” with respect to power. The conception of power that is presupposed by the theorists I am entertaining, and that functions as the backdrop for my reflections, is Foucauldian. The norms that govern femininity, as in the example above, are only one of power’s instantiations. The very distinction between the normal and the pathological is another. Identity categories that affect how the self relates to itself and is treated by others, the discourses that house these categories, and that dictate how specific bodies should be handled or articulated, and the related practices of managing specific bodies, in addition to the populations they make up, are still others. The forms of change I am interested in would in theory help undermine any of this contemporary hydra head’s facets, if only by virtue of loosening the grip that various norms and categories, or in some cases paradigms, have on individual selves.

Both Catherine Malabou’s conception of *plasticity* and Judith Butler’s conception of *performativity* can be thought of as forms of transformation that are insubordinate vis-à-vis contemporary forms of power. *Plasticity*, in Malabou’s work, designates any form’s ability to be transformed and to transform itself. Often the “forms” Malabou is concerned with are biological forms; I will be concerned primarily with the way she has theorized the brain’s capacity to change. *Performativity*, in Butler’s work, names the process through which the self, or subject, stabilizes itself by repeatedly conforming to, or by citing, particular social norms, but it can also name the process through which a subject deviates from these constitutive norms. I track the relationship between *plasticity* and *performativity* with an eye to determining how insubordinate transformation has been theorized by these two leading thinkers. What are the relevant differences between Malabou’s and Butler’s respective visions of insubordination? Might something about the way these visions intersect indicate how insubordination *ought* to be theorized?

Butler and Malabou differ primarily on the question of whether there is a prediscursive form of biological plasticity—a form of plasticity beyond language and unaffected by it, one that is not “constituted by language,” in other words. Malabou affirms the possibility, but Butler remains wary of it. Butler privileges language, which she consistently understands as a technology of power, over bodies, and urges us to avoid positing anything in the way of a prediscursive body. A prediscursive form of plasticity would be equally suspect for her. Surprisingly, however, and as I will discuss, Butler’s writings indirectly affirm a biologically basic form of plasticity. Malabou’s work, for its part, as I will show, has a social-constructivist dimension, and hence, like Butler’s, makes space for us to worry about the discursive constitution of even those things that seem basic, like the body and the body’s plasticity. Without being too reductive, then, I hope to suggest that *plasticity* and *performativity* are structurally similar: they name isomorphic phenomena. I take this convergence to indicate that a basic (that is, prediscursive) corporeal element *should* feature in our understanding of insubordinate change.

Malabou: Plasticity’s Relation to Discourse

Malabou has transformed plasticity into a central concept in continental philosophy. In her work, *plasticity* is not bound to a neurobiological domain, though in this essay, as I mentioned above, the kind of plasticity I want to think about is perhaps principally neurobiological. It is the brain’s ability to receive form (to be shaped, or changed by external forces), to bestow form (to shape itself), and to annihilate form (to actively

overwrite already extant structures, or to passively undergo significant alteration as a result of cell destruction, sometimes changing in such a radical way that there is a corresponding shift in personal identity). Malabou terms this last, annihilating variety of plasticity “explosive” or “destructive” plasticity (Malabou 2008; 2012a).

In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Malabou discusses some of the literature on brain plasticity in order to perform a philosophical intervention with respect to our thinking about the brain (see Malabou 2008). The discussion serves partly to render the three forms of plasticity (the receipt, bestowal, and annihilation of form) concrete. “Our brain is plastic,” she writes, “and we do not know it. . . . We continue to believe in the ‘rigidity’ of an entirely genetically determined brain, about which it is impossible to ask: *What should we do with this?*” (4). Although the anatomy of the brain is genetically determined, the neuronal connections that make the brain the particular brain, the particular form, that it is are forged and multiplied—a process called arborization—in relation to experience, or what happens to the subject, and actions, or what the subject does (6). Neuronal pathways that are consistently reactivated (potentiated) are consolidated: the efficacy of the synapses connecting the neurons making up a pathway increases with repeated stimulation (22). Pathways that fall into desuetude are, in a sense, effaced: the capacity of the relevant synapses to transmit signals diminishes (22). The brain is in this and other ways the product of destruction as much as it is the effect of generation (see 19–20). Other forms of plasticity characterize the brain as well; in fact, the brain turns out to be “a complex entanglement of different types of plasticity” (26). It seems capable, for example, in many instances, of self-repair and reorganization (as when one side of the brain is damaged and the other side of the brain assumes a function previously carried out by the first side).

We will not have to get into the minutiae of Malabou’s discussion to get the conceptual point, which is that the brain can be shaped by its environment, but can also *reconfigure itself*. Repetition is the key to this configuring process (24). Skills and habits are lost and acquired throughout the entire course of a person’s life (25). New memories form. Malabou’s is a thoroughly materialist position, so what applies to the brain applies to the mental: “thought, knowledge, desires, and affects all proceed on a neuronal, that is to say, biological basis” (55). The self, too, is just a “synthesis of all plastic processes at work in the brain” (58). Even something as seemingly entrenched as personality can be resculpted (68). This does not mean, however, that the self can become anything. The neuronal self is in an important way constrained by, indebted to, the form and forms it has received, the form it finds itself thrown into; the neuronal self, like Sartrean nihilating consciousness, has situating limits: “One is formed only by virtue of resistance to form itself” (72); “plastic material retains an imprint and thereby resists endless polymorphism” (15); “[t]he sculpture of the self is born from the deflagration of an original biological matrix, which does not mean that this matrix is disowned or forgotten but that it cancels itself” (74).

The general picture Malabou wishes to limn, then, is one in which the neuronal subject is lodged between freedom and determinism. The anatomy of the brain is genetically determined, but plasticity tempers this determination: it provides “a margin of improvisation” with respect to genetic necessity (8). The brain is also “determined” to the extent that it can and must receive form or be imprinted upon, to the extent that it can and must receive determinations that then affect what it can become. Even this form of determinism is tempered at times; it is tempered by a freedom that can efface, explode, or nullify the determinations it has received (see 17). Malabou often makes the brain’s more extreme transformations, the forms of change that can

alter even personality, out to be the effects of external causes, or “accidents,” such as Phineas Gage’s rod through the head (see Malabou 2012a; 2012b; 2013). Her thinking in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, however, leaves open the possibility that people might *transform themselves* in dramatic ways.

When Malabou claims that our brain is plastic, but we do not know it, she is claiming a few things. Sometimes she is claiming that we still, despite numerous neuroscientific advancements, think of the brain as rigidly determined, programmed (Malabou 2008, 4, 9). At other times, she is claiming that we are aware of plasticity, but only know it in one of its dimensions: plasticity qua the ability to receive form. Our limited sense of plasticity amounts, she tells us, to a sense of “flexibility”:

To be flexible is to receive a form or impression, to be able to fold oneself, to take the fold, not to give it. To be docile, to not explode. Indeed, what flexibility lacks is the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even erase an impression, the power to style. Flexibility is plasticity minus its genius. (12)

The form of plasticity we are acquainted with, then, is a rather insidious one. In a sense, it is not plasticity at all.

In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Malabou often implies, in the way that a realist would, that neuronal plasticity is a truth, a fact independent of language, that language has not always captured: “The persistent use of long-defunct technological models to represent the brain bars access to a true understanding of cerebral function and justifies our lack of interest in it” (52). She laments the fact that even after all the revolutionary discoveries in the neurosciences we have “erroneous” pictures of the brain (2). Her answer to the question of how we might account for this mysterious persistence—that is, of inaccurate, even defunct models—suggests that she is not a realist in any straightforward respect, however. Her answer to this question is “modern power,” which has a vested interest in the forms of life, or of being, that these conceptualizations make possible.² Obsolete models for the brain—the “central telephone” model, according to which the brain does not produce representations, but only collects and circulates them (33), the “computer” model, according to which the brain is a rigid, because programmed, control center (35), and any model, in fact, that strips the brain of its fully plastic power—coincide neatly (in many ways, and there is no need to elaborate them all) with the current face of capitalism and accommodate it, sustaining docility on the sociopolitical plane (10): Today flexibility is required everywhere (one’s schedule must be flexible, one must be “flexible on the job,” and so on); rigidity will only ensure that one sinks swifly and hits rock-bottom. As Malabou writes, the requirement to adapt to anything suggests that we have a better sense of “what we can stand than what we can create” (13). She urges us to cultivate a sense of what the brain, of what we, can do, as opposed to simply tolerate (13).

The idea that the social and the neuronal “interdetermine each other and mutually give each other form,” which is the basis for Malabou’s critique in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (see Malabou 2008, 9), suggests that the kind of radical plasticity she is interested in is not simply waiting beneath the devious models and metaphors that purport, but ultimately fail, to capture the brain. The robust form of plasticity she is interested in, she insists, is certainly not lived, and cannot be lived if these models and metaphors continue to circulate and take hold. It is oddly, then, a discursive intervention that seems to be the condition of plasticity’s possibility: it is only in a “tiny political, philosophical, and cultural space” that the promise of plasticity “can at once be

theoretically deployed and realized” (67–68). Malabou frames her task in the text as precisely this kind of intervention: a “critique” of “neuronal ideology” (11), an attempt to “stigmatize the definitional magma in which, in the end, we all bathe” (14). Only by articulating plasticity otherwise will it be possible to actualize plasticity, to “free this freedom” (11), to unleash “new ways of living” (67), and open the possibility of “a social and political non-determinism” (13).

The thought that critical reflection, or a philosophical form of discourse, is plasticity’s necessary supplement—the thought that, without a critical discourse about plasticity, it will not be possible to actualize plasticity in the fullest sense of the word—persists into Malabou’s later work as well. In *Morphing Intelligence: From IQ Measurement to Artificial Brains*, Malabou adjusts some of the dimensions of her thinking in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, subjecting the aforementioned idea to only slight reconfiguration (see Malabou 2019). The text is centered on the concept of intelligence. Malabou tracks some of the different ways “intelligence” has been articulated, arguing for a conception of intelligence that is anchored in a nuanced understanding of plasticity. She suggests that when “intelligence” emerged as a concept it was yoked to the idea of genetic determination in problematic ways; in this guise, “intelligence” became a tool for normalizing forms of power: it lent itself to psychometrics and even eugenics. An alternative articulation of intelligence became possible once epigenetic factors, factors that modulate gene expression without altering genes themselves, were spotlighted in scientific discourse. These factors make plasticity, in Malabou’s robust sense of the word, possible: the gap between genotypes and phenotypes, or between genes and how, as a result of environmental influences, they are expressed, is the effect of plasticity. Phenotypes, that is, are the effects of plasticity. If genes represent determinism, then epigenetic factors temper determinism; they situate the organism between determinism and freedom in the same way that neuronal plasticity does by embellishing upon what is merely programmed. In fact, Malabou understands the forms of shaping the brain is subject to as it interacts with its environment and acts upon itself as epigenetic forms of shaping (63–64). The conception of intelligence that epigenetics makes possible, then, aligns intelligence with the organism’s *natural* capacity to acquire, with the help of environmental influence, habit, and education, capacities that were not originally “natural” to it; it is “the natural aptitude of an organism to produce itself as a second nature” (58).

Malabou suggests that this is the conception of intelligence that characterizes our time. A third development in our understanding of intelligence, one that, she tells us, we are still moving toward, would see the distinction between “natural” and “artificial” intelligence, or between “natural” and “simulated” forms of plasticity, dissolved. This is a distinction she recognizes that she was still tethered to in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (see Malabou 2019, 82, 90, 92). Recent technological developments, including computer chips that function like neurons, which learn and transform themselves, she suggests, make the distinction untenable (15–16, 86). “[P]lasticity,” she writes, “is not . . . the opposite of the machine, the determining element that stops us from equating the brain with a computer” (113). It is fair to say that the main distinction between Malabou’s thinking in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* and her thinking in *Morphing Intelligence* has to do with the way she is conceiving of what it means to “be programmed” and is reflecting on what is involved in transcending or escaping a program. In her earlier work, she tends to associate the brain’s freedom, or its ability to transcend anything like a program, with its ability to explode its previous formations; in *Morphing Intelligence*, she still emphasizes the importance of explosive change, but recognizes the role the brain’s “heritage” can play in these forms of

transformation more explicitly. By the brain's "heritage," I mean its genetic "program," yes, but also the form it has taken on, the traces of its past that persist in this form, the patterns and habits that have come to characterize it. Malabou seems to be referring to all of these things when she refers to what is machine-like or automatic in the organism: "Intelligence is not . . . strictly speaking, a process of making breaks; instead it operates in continuity or, again, in transition. Thus it does not break violently with the past but rather proceeds through a constant reconfiguration of the past in the movement of a negotiated taking leave" (104). Intelligence involves "using past experience to transform future experience" (105). Malabou essentially suggests that the role the brain's heritage plays in significant forms of transformation tethers plasticity to a kind of "automaticity," something in the domain of a "program," but that this fact does not undermine the power of transformation itself; it is not possible, then, to dismiss artificial intelligence on the basis of its relation to a program or to automaticity: "the 'mechanization' of brain plasticity paradoxically signals its undetermined nature, not its routine" (114).

The discourse, then, that would function as plasticity's supplement, the discourse that would make it possible to oppose the cultural forces that attempt to deploy even the most nuanced conceptions of "intelligence" and "plasticity" for the purposes of normalization and social regulation, would not be one that opposed natural plasticity to artificial plasticity, and, relatedly, would not be one that opposed "the automatic." Instead, Malabou tells us, it would be a discourse that "bring[s] to light the immanent contradiction of automatism, thereby opposing the stupidity and intelligence of automatism within automatism itself" (114). In other words, it would be a discourse that affirmed the extent to which the "automatic," all that which functions as the subject's heritage, can function against itself precisely because the brain is programmed, as it were, to stray from its programming. If the brain has a fundamental tic, it is that of disrupting its own automatisms: "The regulating loops of mental life function solely by responding to the disturbances that temporarily interrupt them. . . . Contingency and necessity, creativity and routine, repetition and disequilibrium, organization and reorganization are all constitutive of automatism and result from the dialectical relation it has with itself" (119).

When "plasticity" and "intelligence" are coopted by power, or are used as "gateways of power into bodies," this is done in a way that severs these concepts from a nuanced understanding of automatism (Malabou 2019, 132–33). Malabou sees cooptation as a permanent risk; this is a recurring theme in her work: neuronal plasticity can be invoked to naturalize and hence legitimize different forms of social, political, and economic normativity (see Malabou 2008; 2009; 2015a; 2019). It can function, for instance, to naturalize an understanding of the social world as a network, making it possible to assess people on the basis of their ability to integrate themselves into the network and to function in the way the network requires (Malabou 2009, 220–21). Because it becomes a model for functioning, plasticity can also function as a measure for illness: those who are marginalized within the network, or who cannot move in the multidirectional, flexible ways they are required to within the network, are "ill" (223–25). Other forms of normalizing judgment can be buttressed through an appeal to plasticity as well. Plasticity is even occasionally invoked to naturalize what are merely value judgments in the arts, as if a particular aesthetic could be deemed superior because of the extent to which it is consistent with or is conducive to cerebral forms of "harmony," for instance (Malabou 2009, 235–56; 2019, 137). Invocations like these are wrongheaded precisely because cerebral plasticity implies cerebral change: the brain has a "nature" that shifts; what titillates it can shift, too: it can accommodate harmony as much as

disharmony (Malabou 2019, 137). As I said, this relation that plasticity bears to transformation is conveniently forgotten when “plasticity,” the category, is deployed in the service of power. Malabou observes that power mobilizes a reductive conception of plasticity that it then subordinates us to; it grounds political, social, and economic forms of normativity in “plasticity” and would have us simply obey them, even though a genuine affirmation of plasticity would reveal that these forms of normativity are contingent and alterable (Malabou 2009, 227).

Even in her later work, Malabou suggests that a critical discourse on plasticity is required to subvert this ruse on the part of power and make plasticity live for us, or is required to help us conceive of ourselves as plastic in the fullest sense of this term: “The new neurocentric and technological condition of knowledge is in fact twofold: it enables new practices for transforming the self, inventing lifestyles and behavior, in an experimental theoretical and practical attitude, but it can also close off all these ways out by blocking them with the uniformizing processes of a reactionary positivism. The critical task is to rediscover the pathway for interrupting automaticity so as to better emancipate automatism” (Malabou 2019, 132–33). In *Morphing Intelligence*, Malabou nearly implies that this interruption, that resistance to power, will occur without human effort as a result of the dialectical negotiation of the contradictions inherent in plasticity, specifically those tensions between the discrepant forms of automatism that are involved in plasticity (118–19, 144). At the same time, she suggests that this dialectical negotiation occurs with the help of critical reflection and hence with the help of a critical discourse: “A dialectical relation . . . is only resolved through the power of its own tension. . . . So it is a question of simply leaving be [our understanding of both natural intelligence and artificial intelligence as plastic] and doing so without value judgment, *which does not mean without critical thought*” (118–19; my emphasis). This suggestion is consistent with Malabou’s insistence elsewhere that, if she is to *think* and hence proffer a nonreductive form of plasticity, she must simultaneously delimit—that is, indicate, in a critical discourse of her own—the various ways this conception of plasticity can serve reductionism (Malabou 2009, 218).³

Butler: Discourse, Performativity, and Insubordination

What Malabou terms *plasticity* is a basic biological capacity to transform. Still, it is a capacity that must be exercised. This is why it is so responsive to the discourse on the brain: a discourse that makes it difficult to grasp plasticity in all of its dimensions, to grasp the brain’s fluidity, will not encourage us to act in ways that are consistent with the brain’s potential. As a result, the likelihood of realizing this potential will diminish. Our fluidity as subjects is contingent on how the category *plasticity* has been discursively determined. Discourse is of central importance in Judith Butler’s work as well. In this section, I exploit two of Butler’s texts—*Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990) and *The Psychic Life of Power* (Butler 1997)—to explore how discourse is, for her, related to the constitution of bodies and subjects, and to articulate her conception of insubordinate transformation. In the next section, I argue that Butler’s understanding of insubordination is compatible with a prediscursive form of plasticity, irrespective of the constitutive role she grants to discourse. In this sense, her conception of insubordinate change is structurally akin to Malabou’s.

The thinking in *Gender Trouble* admits of a few threads. The book is in part a problematization of the category *woman* and of identity-based politics. Butler’s framework is largely (though not exclusively) Foucauldian: Since, on a Foucauldian way of thinking,

there is no place outside of power where we might locate ourselves in order to resist power, we must understand even feminist discourse as incorporated into the power-field (see Butler 1990, 7). Butler thus presents the very category *woman*—woman qua stable subject, woman qua universal category, the very rallying point of feminism, a precipitate of feminist discourse—as a precipitate of power. It is not only a category produced by power; it also serves as an inroad for power, feeding and extending it, facilitating some of feminism’s more violent, totalizing gestures, as when, for example, feminist issues became essentially the issues of white, middle-class, heterosexual women (5–8, 18). The book is not just about a category, however—a gender-identity category—that receives a particular cultural articulation; it is about concrete gender and sex and desire, which are likewise produced and sustained in the forms they assume by a norm-governed form of power. The book is about bodies and, as Foucault would say, “the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested” (Foucault 1990, 152). The stable subject of feminism that Butler critiques is also a pooling subjectivity instituted by power.

Although Butler frames her project in *The Psychic Life of Power* as one that makes use of psychoanalytic concepts and ideas to flesh out Foucauldian *assujettissement*—the subject’s becoming what it is through its own subjection, including its subjection to available categories—this was already something like her task in the earlier *Gender Trouble*. In the latter, she was already having recourse to the concept of prohibition to make sense of gender identity and desire.

Butler’s notion of “gender melancholia” is based on a reading of Freud’s “The Ego and the Id” and “Mourning and Melancholia.” In “The Ego and the Id,” Freud makes the character of the ego out to be a precipitate of its losses: unable to fully relinquish a love object it was previously invested in, the ego incorporates the object into itself; it thereby assumes the features of the object (see Freud 1984, 368–69). On Butler’s reading, a prohibition on homosexuality, rather than the incest taboo Freud preoccupies himself with, is primary and initiates the losses that account for gender-identity-formation (Butler 1990, 87). The ego becomes masculine to the extent that a male love object is prohibited and given up, and feminine to the extent that a female love object is prohibited and given up. A boy’s erotic love for his father, for instance, is not only incestuous (the father is prohibited as an object of the boy’s love), but exhibits a culturally prohibited aim (it is homosexual: men are prohibited as the objects of the boy’s love). Through the workings of melancholia, the lost object-relation, the relation that, in this case, would take a male as its object, is internalized as a prohibition; rigid gender boundaries (the boy identifies as masculine) and boundary-policing (think of hyperbolized shows of masculinity, though policing can be more subtle) function to conceal this love’s loss, which remains more than unacknowledged, which is, in fact, not even experienced as a loss at all (86).⁴

For Butler, this form of melancholy—a never-experienced loss catalyzed and sustained by prohibition, where prohibition at least occurs partly at a discursive level—is at the root of any man’s insisting that he doesn’t love men, has never loved a man, and never will, and is similarly at the root of any woman’s insisting that she has never loved women, has never loved a woman, and never will (93–94).⁵ For Butler, then, cultural prohibitions and gender norms invest the body in its very facticity, informing its gestures and stylization, while also texturing its desires, pleasures, and affects (86, 93); these seem “natural” (one cannot imagine oneself otherwise, one’s “dispositions” simply are what they are), but behind them is a dissimulating form of power (95). As Butler says: “Which pleasures shall live and which shall die is often a matter of

which serve the legitimating practices of identity formation which take place within the matrix of gender norms" (96).

Significantly, for Butler, the gendered subject is not simply founded once: Power does not function to institute the gendered subject once, at the beginning, and then leave it to unfold as it will. Gender identity, instead, is both "constructed and maintained by the *consistent application* of . . . taboo" (86; my emphasis). Gender's seeming stability, in other words, is just the result of a consistent iteration, or citation, of the cultural norms/ideals that circumscribe it over time: It is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (45). It is also a "stylization" of affect and sexual desire through repetition, though "stylization" suggests volition, and these acts are not undertaken by willful subjects who have consciously elected to undertake them. To say gender is performative is just to say that it is constituted through iterated acts of citation (34). The fact, however, that gender, that identity, is and must be instituted again and again, across time, as much as it consolidates norms, also furnishes the key to resisting normalizing power.⁶

For Butler, as in Foucault's schema, there is no place outside of power from which to resist power, but power generates its own resistance: power, forgiving the personification, "ought to be understood not as a deterministic divine will, but as a perpetual bumbler, preparing the ground for the insurrections against him" (39). The cultural norms that circumscribe gender dictate that "intelligible genders are those that in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (23): "Male" bodies are "supposed" to be continuous with masculinity; these bodies are "supposed" to want and to join with female bodies that are continuous with femininity. These norms also, however, generate a domain of illegitimacy, in fact, of unintelligibility—an "outside," as Butler puts this, though it is not a genuine outside, since, as their foil, it relies for its content on dominant norms—that can erupt during any of the gendered subject's iterations, expanding the domain of cultural intelligibility.

A woman–woman relationship that is also parsed as a "feminine subject"–"feminine subject" relationship (as opposed to a butch–femme relationship) would be an example of a culturally unintelligible relationship that could function, by proposing a homosexuality that could not be read through the lens of heterosexuality, to confound the dominant, heterosexual regime: a masculine woman loving a feminine woman is less of an affront to a heterosexist way of thinking, since it is still a relationship that might be parsed using a heterosexist combinatory logic: male to female, masculine to feminine (Butler 1997, 165). Subversions of heterosexist power (what Butler calls "gender trouble"), then, often occur as acts or gender configurations that disrupt the lines of connection that are "supposed" to be maintained among biological sex, gender expression, sexual desire, and sexual practice (Butler 1990, 23). They can also effect subversion by other means. Drag, for example, is a kind of hyperbolization that creates discontinuity between "sex" and "gender," but that is also subversive in other ways: in citing the idealizations that govern gender, it also reveals that so-called "natural gender" is itself citational, performative, a kind of copy, and a copy, moreover, that needs the copies it articulates as secondary (that is, "not the real deal") in order to assert itself as primary and natural. "Natural gender" is revealed to be the opposite of primary and natural: if it needs these copies to establish itself, then it cannot claim in any easy way to be prior to them (Butler 2004; see also 1993, 125). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler also notes that injurious social categories might themselves be assumed and iterated in ways that diverge from power's "intentions": "only by occupying—being occupied by—the

injurious term can I resist and oppose it, recasting the power that constitutes me as the power I oppose” (Butler 1997, 104).

In Butler’s schema, every moment a subject cites a gender norm is also a moment the norm is vulnerable to subversion. An analogy with Sartre’s model of consciousness was useful when we were discussing plasticity, and will again be useful here. Butler’s subject, like a Sartrean consciousness, is not tethered to what it has been, and can perform itself differently in the next instant. Of course, Butler is a Foucauldian, and her conception of agency is not quite as untroubled as Sartre’s. In her framework, when the subject performs itself differently, this is only because power has produced the subject differently; if the subject diverges from power, this is because power has diverged from itself. The subject’s vagaries and power’s vagaries are the same thing, differently described (Butler 1990, 40). Nevertheless, at the heart of her critique is a subject that is contingent and alterable: “[A]gency is the assumption of a purpose unintended by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs. This is, as it were, the ambivalent scene of agency, *constrained by no teleological necessity*” (Butler 1997, 15; my emphasis).

Butler pushes Foucault’s insistence that the subject is constituted by power past the considerations found in Foucault’s work: Her way of framing things enables us to pose the question of how it is that the subject is sustained in its subjection through its own autonomous gestures, or how it is that the subject comes to desire its own subjection, and, in a sense, pursue it: “How does the subjection of desire require and institute the desire for subjection?” (19). For Butler, a desire or longing for social existence—a desire that is both established and exploited by power—accounts for the subject’s subjected persistence: “[w]here social categories guarantee a recognizable and enduring social existence, the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all” (20). “To desire the conditions of one’s own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself” (9). Because of the nature of the subject’s attachment to identity categories (gender categories and others) and the laws that constrain what forms of being can enjoy legibility, resistance to power can sometimes involve self-dissolution or self-abdication. The insubordinate subject risks becoming culturally unintelligible.

“Insubordination,” in Butler’s work, just is the name for the motion, carried by iteration, that courts this risk, that sees power grow discontinuous with itself without ceasing to be power, and that simultaneously sees the subject grow discontinuous with itself.

An Insubordinate Body Beyond Discourse in Malabou and Butler

Performativity—a temporal, to a certain extent constrained (since it always occurs within and as power), but ultimately nonteleological process of subject-constitution (and of self-dissolution)—is structurally akin to Malabou’s *plasticity*. Although plasticity names even the little transformations Butler is unconcerned with (that is, the changes that occur by dint of the subject’s mere persistence in time: “[t]he plasticity of time is inscribed in the brain”; “if we didn’t destroy ourselves a little bit, we would not live” [Malabou 2008, 74]), it also names the possibility of breaking radically with previous formations, the same possibility Butler articulates as insubordination. Malabou, resonating with Butler, even uses the language of insubordination to describe this kind of breaking on the part of the brain: “the plasticity of the brain means to see in it not only the creator and receiver of form, but also an agency of disobedience to every

constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model” (6). Plasticity, like performativity, is to a certain extent constrained: the brain’s form is bestowed, even if it is reworkable; it is not pure freedom, but forces us to rethink the relation between freedom and determinism. Malabou’s plastic, neurobiological subject has situating limits; in the Foucauldian schema Butler is working with, these situating limits assume the form of social discourses, categories, norms of cultural intelligibility, and other functionaries of power. Even for Malabou, it seems, discourse may function as a constitutive constraint: plasticity without a discourse that names it and makes it live for us ends up not being plasticity at all (it ends up being “flexibility”). To say so is somewhat contentious, for despite Malabou’s insistence that, to quicken plasticity, an intervention with respect to both popular talk and some forms of scientific talk concerning the brain is needed—which implies that discourse is constitutive of plasticity—she also insists that we need to refrain from subordinating the biological to the purely symbolic.

In “Will Sovereignty Ever Be Deconstructed?,” Malabou performs a brief critique of different philosophical discourses on biopolitics: Foucault’s, Agamben’s, and Derrida’s (see Malabou 2015c). In each of these discourses, she suggests, a distinction between a “biological body” and a “symbolic body” is made in a way that mimics the very gesture these thinkers are committed to criticizing: These philosophers are critical of the fact that the biological sciences impose “law” on the biological by means of the symbolic: “function, program, teleology, organism: [these are concepts that explain] how biology conceptually and practically deploys itself as law” (Malabou 2015c, 38). Philosophical critique, however, also functions by means of the symbolic: if sovereignty is the result of a signifier being transformed into a rigid figure, then philosophy’s task is to reintroduce symbolic excess, making the signifier again “ungraspable by power” (42). This gesture is only the deployment of another form of sovereignty, however: it colonizes resistance, locating it at a symbolic level, while never granting the biological any agency of its own (38). The biological becomes power’s (that is, becomes discourse’s) mere instrument. Elsewhere Malabou writes:

That a resistance to what is today called “biopower”—the monitoring, regulation, exploitation, and instrumentalization of the living organism . . . can emerge from possibilities inscribed in the structure of the living organism itself and not from philosophical concepts which skate on the surface of this structure without ever grasping it; that there may be a biological resistance to biopolitics . . . this seems never to have been considered by contemporary philosophers. (Malabou 2015a, 292)

She makes out her own work on plasticity to be disengaged “from any symbolic grip,” or thinks of it as attempting to open an “unassignable place” in a world in which “every place has been assigned,” or as trying “to constantly empty [itself of] its own sovereignty” (Malabou 2015b, 58). This rhetoric may seem incompatible with her cry for a discursive intervention in both *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* and *Morphing Intelligence*. Simple incompatibility is not what is at work here, though. In “Will Sovereignty Ever Be Deconstructed?,” she salvages the domain of the symbolic by *splicing it into* the biological:

[I]f we can affirm that plasticity inhabits the biological, that it opens, within organic life, a supplement of indeterminacy, a void, a floating entity, it is then possible to claim that material life is not dependent in its dynamic upon a

transcendental symbolic economy; on the contrary, biological life creates or produces its own symbolization. (Malabou 2015c, 43)

The suggestion is not entirely transparent, but there are a few things we might discern from it: First, plasticity is what is supposed to make it possible to say that “biological life creates or produces its own symbolization.” Should we take this to mean that plasticity constrains the language meant to describe it (as in scientific realism: we name what is there, when we name it accurately, because it is there)? In light of all of the above, this move seems too facile. Should we understand the claim in relation to Malabou’s suggestion, in *Morphing Intelligence*, that the dialectical resolution of the tensions between plasticity’s “automatic” components will function in a subversive manner? It is not my task to answer these questions here. I do, however, want to draw attention to the way Malabou, in the quotation above, insists on an independent “material life.” Her insistence on this independent life places her thought in stark contrast to Butler’s. As we will see further on, Butler implicitly makes space for a prediscursive form of plasticity, even though her rhetoric exhibits significant resistance to the idea.

After writing *Gender Trouble*, Butler was criticized for failing to attend sufficiently to the body in its leaky, desiring materiality. *Bodies that Matter* is her attempt to respond to this criticism, though she admits that her thinking in the text is unruly: “I began writing this book by trying to consider the materiality of the body only to find that the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains” (Butler 1993, ix). In the book, she seems not to stray too far from her thinking in *Gender Trouble*. In *Gender Trouble*, she understands gender (and in fact much more than gender) as the effect of iterated power (repeatedly cited gender norms and ideals); in *Bodies that Matter*, she understands the body’s “materiality” itself as such a construction, the effect of iterated power, an effect that, like gender, is naturalized, or stabilized, through iteration (see x, 15, 28). In *Gender Trouble*, again, she suggests that the body’s very facticity—the way the body is stylized and enacted, the desires it has, the pleasures it is capable of—are effects of a dissimulating form of power, a power that disappears as the origin of its productions, so that these productions seem necessary, natural, brute: just always there (gender melancholy, again, names a loss that is never experienced as such). Sex itself, usually understood as a biological foundation of some kind, as materiality through and through, is actually, she suggests, read from gender, produced by the very power that generates lines of continuity between what the body looks like, how it conceives of itself, or identifies (that is, as masculine or feminine), and what it desires (men? women?): “The disavowed homosexuality at the base of melancholic heterosexuality re-emerges as the self-evident anatomical facticity of sex, where ‘sex’ designates the blurred unity of anatomy, ‘natural identity,’ and ‘natural desire’” (Butler 1990, 97–98).

Although Butler distinguishes her position on materiality from one of “linguistic monism”—according to which “everything is only and always language” (Butler 1993, 6), or, we might say, only and always a construction, a precipitate of power—her basis for making the distinction is in some ways tenuous. Hers is a position, of course, that posits a pseudo “outside” to power’s functioning: a zone of exclusion, of unintelligibility, that is nevertheless a function of power—that owes it, or is related to it in its capacity as a foil for the norms power enshrines. This is her main ground for insisting that her position is not purely constructivist: “the inquiry into the erasures and exclusions by which the construction of the subject operates is no longer constructivism” (8); “the limits of constructivism are exposed as those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as ‘bodies’” (15). It is not, however,

as if this domain of unintelligibility is nondiscursive; it is certainly not prediscursive in the way that people hope the body is when they attack the radical constructivists for making everything “only and always language”; again: it owes its existence to discursivity. Butler would caution us, too, against appealing to “irreducible” materiality: even the “irreducibility” of “irreducible materiality” is, she suggests, constructed, constituted through the workings of power as prior and irreducible to power; our recourse to a conception of materiality, to irreducible materiality, will always only be recourse to “a version of materiality,” a regulatory schema, or conceptualization (see 10, 14, 29).⁷ Such conceptualizations, like gender and other social categories, will generate their own domains of illegibility, prefiguring “in advance what will and what will not appear as an intelligible body” (54). To have simple recourse to “matter” and “materiality,” then, is to risk perpetuating the exclusions that are a function of these categories’ historical significations, of the contingent and changing boundaries that have informed them (see ix, 29, 54).

At first glance, Butler’s way of theorizing seems to preclude anything like the “independent life” Malabou claims to try to honor in her writings, anything like a biological life that would produce its own symbolization. She does, however, insist that “[t]o claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes” (10). This statement seems to affirm the existence of a remainder, something beyond discourse. Would Butler’s framework accommodate, then, some objective form of “materiality,” a form of materiality in the world that would constrain our linguistic practice, something that we would “remake” with our designations, but would not “invent”? It seems it must. Insubordinate performativity would not be possible if the conception of the subject Butler is working with were not irreducibly plastic. Insubordinate performativity, as we saw, occurs when a subject, constituted through the workings of power, and stabilized through power’s reiteration, upon a subsequent iteration, changes in an unexpected way, or becomes something that exceeds or undermines the norms and categories that up to that point had circumscribed its possibilities. This movement—iteration within situating limits, but in the absence of a fixed outcome—is a plastic movement par excellence.

At times, Butler even verges on describing it as one: In their collaborative work, *Sois mon corps*, Butler and Malabou read Hegel’s master–slave dialectic through the lenses of their respective preoccupations (see Butler and Malabou 2010). In the essays making up the work, Butler and Malabou reflect on the plasticity of the “body” as it features in the *Phenomenology*, and on the plasticity of the subject whose body it is; they also think about the relation between the movement that constitutes this body and the movement that constitutes the subject in Foucauldian theory (that is, power’s production of the subject).⁸ The body in Hegel, as Malabou and Butler theorize it, is a site of delegation: the slave, in the master–slave dialectic, is required, for instance, “to be” the master’s body for the master. There are myriad ways, too, in which the subjects involved in the dialectic must become, through labor or by other means, bodies that are more than strictly biological bodies. Butler suggests that movements like these in Hegel mirror the way the body, in Foucault’s work, is always already shaped by power, or, in other words, is always already shaped by something “outside” of it, something that is not “proper” to it (Butler and Malabou 2010, 58, 67, 80, 103, 104). In Hegel’s work, the body becomes what it is, and makes the self the subject’s “proper” self, by becoming *other* than a body that preceded it; after the fact of its transformation, the body nevertheless remains linked to the body that preceded it (80). We can note that this movement maps onto the more Foucauldian movement through which the subject becomes

attached to the power that forms it, or through which it becomes attached to its own subjection, and also maps onto the more Foucauldian movement through which the subject exceeds the power that forms it, without ceasing to be shaped by power. Butler reads the aforementioned “Foucauldian movements” into Hegel in both *Sois mon corps* and *The Psychic Life of Power*.⁹ What is interesting is that, in *Sois mon corps*, Butler seems to embrace the concept of *plasticity*, using it to speak about the forms of transformation both she and Malabou are tracking in Hegel’s work.¹⁰ In fact, in Butler’s final contribution to *Sois mon corps*, she aligns Foucauldian resistance to power, or insubordination, with the “pulse” of Hegelian “life.” This pulse, as Butler sees it, involves an insuperable tension between attachment to forms and detachment from them, or, we can say, between continuity—an emerging form is always continuous with a prior form and has a heritage—and explosion—an emerging form, though it has a heritage, has also, to a certain extent, left what it was behind (see 99–104).¹¹ This is, of course, a way of aligning Foucauldian resistance with a certain kind of corporeal plasticity. I stress that Butler only seems to align Foucauldian resistance with a specific kind of corporeal plasticity. This is a point I would now like to elaborate on.

Sois mon corps makes it possible for us to reflect on how radical change can be before its “insubordinate” potential is compromised. Both Malabou and Butler read Hegel’s “body” as a body that is perpetually morphing but never able to fully leave itself behind. At times, though, they seem to differ with respect to how they think about the subject’s transformation in Hegel’s text. The impasse they find themselves at in this regard has implications for the question of how insubordinate plasticity should be thought. Malabou points out that the *Phenomenology* leaves space for the subject to thoroughly dissolve: she associates “absolute knowledge” with this dissolution: it exposes, she tells us, an anonymous body, one no self can lay claim to, precisely because the self no longer exists (53, 95). Hegel in this way makes space for what Malabou in her own discourse terms “explosive” or “destructive” plasticity.¹² Often Malabou associates explosive change with change so radical that the self undergoing change does not survive, while the organism nevertheless does: a new self seems to displace the old. Victims of neurodegenerative disorders or people whose brains have been severely damaged can sometimes seem like new people; they are the products of explosive plasticity, understood in this way. In much of her work, Malabou associates explosive plasticity with pathological change, and, more specifically, with the destruction of the mechanisms in the brain that regulate emotion (Malabou 2012a; 2012b; 2013). The subjects produced through this kind of destruction are supposed to be disaffected and compromised in their functioning. Sometimes Malabou goes so far as to suggest that they are nonsubjects (Malabou 2013, 8). The form of explosive change Malabou locates in Hegel’s work seems to produce precisely this: a nonsubject, a thoroughly anonymous body. In *Sois mon corps*, Malabou suggests that the Foucauldian subject is incapable of this kind of radical plasticity: the Foucauldian subject, even when it changes in subversive ways, remains to some extent continuous with itself (Butler and Malabou 2010, 93).¹³ At the same time, she implies that a subject formed through extremely destructive processes, a subject without a past, a self produced through the thorough obliteration of a former self, would not be a subject vulnerable to the forms of subjectivation Foucauldians are interested in: it would lack the capacity to become attached to anything, including the forms of power that function as the basis for both its subjection and its resistance to that subjection (see Butler and Malabou 2010, 53; see also Malabou 2012a, 205).¹⁴ The subject who is the product of explosive plasticity, when explosive plasticity is construed in the specific way we’ve just articulated, is, then, a

subject who has acceded to what Foucauldians would think of as an impossible “place beyond power,” but it is only as a nonsubject that it is able to exist there.

We have seen that Malabou also speaks of explosive forms of change that are consistent with a degree of continuity (Malabou 2008; 2019): the subject can transform in significant ways without becoming completely severed from its history; transformation can be radical and yet “normal”: it can occur without compromising subjectivity itself. What we learn from *Sois mon corps* is that insubordinate change is change that is consistent with continuity; it is a form of self-overcoming, a form of plasticity, that is compatible with the preservation of a link to the subject’s history. If it is “explosive,” it is *not* so thoroughly explosive that it devastates subjectivity itself. We see this conclusion affirmed in Butler’s response to Malabou’s suggestion that Foucauldian forms of resistance never seem to involve a self’s total departure from selfhood. Butler, it seems, simply concedes the point. If Malabou’s observation can in any way be taken as an indictment of Foucauldian theory, then we can understand Butler’s response as a way of suggesting that continuity is not a problem, that the fact that resistance does not assume the form of thoroughgoing self-overcoming, or self-devastation, is not a problem. The Foucauldian subject, in its capacity as a subject that resists the power that forms it, still becomes other than what it is. It gives itself to a future it cannot fully anticipate, and, in this sense, Butler tells us, has an “attachment” to itself that is anything but absolute. Neither attachment nor detachment, though, is absolute; there is always a blend of these two movements, and that means that the subject does not fully relinquish itself either (see Butler and Malabou 2010, 99–104).¹⁵ An unruly subject is one who can undergo significant change while its general identity is still preserved. The subject who relinquishes too much of itself is not all the more unruly as a result; it is, rather, nonextant (see Butler and Malabou 2010, 104).

I’ve been trying to motivate the idea that the form of transformation Butler associates with a subject’s resistance to the power that forms it involves a plastic movement. It is plastic in one of the senses of Malabou’s term: The subject’s change is radical, but the subject nevertheless retains a link to its own past; it remains constituted by power, even though the way that power constitutes it has changed. The way Butler filters her thinking about subjection and insubordination through Hegel’s work is curious: she specifically associates subjection and insubordination with the production of a body, and with corporeal metamorphosis, which she refers to using Malabou’s term, *plasticity*. The analogy gives us permission to think of Butler’s notion of insubordination as a neuronal affair: power leaves its constitutive traces on the brain itself; hence, resistance will involve neuronal reconfiguration. Resistance, that is, is a cerebral process of surpassing cerebral forms while maintaining a link to these surpassed forms, or to the brain’s history. This kind of reconfiguration will coincide with any other form of corporeal plasticity that could be involved in power’s resistance, since the whole body extends into and is mapped and regulated by the brain. These reflections are compatible with what Malabou has termed the “biologization of the transcendental,” an understanding of the “becoming-subject of the subject,” the object of Foucault’s “historical ontology of ourselves,” as an epigenetic becoming (Malabou 2019, 131). What should we make, then, of the fact that Butler’s work, in precluding the recognition of anything corporeal and basic, or irreducibly material, or prediscursive, precludes the recognition of a basic form of plasticity?

The same tension runs through Foucault’s writing; its presence in Butler’s writing may be the trace of an inherited framework. On the one hand, Foucault insists that we must understand discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of

which they speak” (Foucault 2002, 54). “[T]here is no prediscursive fate disposing the word in our favour. We must conceive discourse as a violence we do to things” (Foucault 1971, 354). These statements are unfriendly to the idea that there might be plasticity beyond and before language. On the other hand, Foucault suggests that “bodies and pleasures” might be the pivot for forms of resistance to normalizing power (Foucault 1990, 157).¹⁶ Ladelle McWhorter takes this suggestion to mean that resistance lies in the nonteleological cultivation of new pleasures and corporeal capacities (McWhorter 1999, 176–192). If this is right, then it seems resistance, even in Foucault’s work, is contingent on a fundamental form of plasticity (plasticity is what makes it possible, in the first place, to cultivate new pleasures, and to become, as a subject, “otherwise”). It seems, actually, that both power’s ability to subject the subject (by means of identity categories, norms, disciplinary practices, and so on) and the subject’s resistance to its own formative subjection would have to play out against a plastic backdrop. As Malabou writes: “To construct one’s identity is a process that can only be the development of an original biological malleability, a first transformability” (Malabou 2011, 138).

Theorizing Prediscursive Plasticity: the Stakes

Butler’s *performativity*, in spite of the fact that her work is in many respects social-constructivist, is beholden to a biologically basic capacity for transformation: plasticity. That even a thinker so adamant to refuse the thought of a corporeal element before language must presuppose such an element is telling. Our attempts to theorize insubordination should honor this element. There are, of course, certain risks involved in admitting a prediscursive corporeal capacity like plasticity into our thinking. Butler is acutely aware of these risks, and Malabou is as well.

The tendency to think of sex as a prediscursive fact and the natural determinant of gender is the basis for various forms of exclusion and violence: the designation of certain gender and sexual expressions as somehow “unnatural” or abominable, the resultant attempts to manage or quash them, the reduction of women to their bodies and other forms of essentialism, the surgical alteration of intersex children, and so on. If we must admit a biologically basic fact into our thinking, then it seems *plasticity* is the least controversial candidate for such a fact: because it is simply form’s capacity to transform, it is in a certain sense apotropaic: it has a built-in way of warding off essentialism. Beyond this, it seems it need not necessarily generate the domain of exclusion, or the set of “illegitimate” bodies, genders, and sexual expressions, that other candidates for the title “basic material, or corporeal, fact” risk generating.

Still, even if plasticity is an irreducible, prediscursive fact of our existence, it would be foolish to relate to it as a phenomenon thoroughly immune to the effects of discourse, or as a feature of our existence that was not constantly being usurped and perverted by the language used to handle it, to the detriment of its insubordinate promise. Butler’s and Malabou’s respective writings make this insight available to us. “How could one not see that . . . plasticity is recuperated at all levels to affix new labels and fashion new categories? Schizo brains, criminal brains, female brains, and male brains . . . Neurobiology today is undeniably the new discourse of power,” Malabou writes (Malabou 2015a, 299). Plasticity, like other categories, can be deployed for the purposes of normalization: We can imagine scenarios in which the fact that the brain can change is taken to imply that it ought to change, and ought to change in the direction of certain cultural ideals. Consciousness of potential dangers like this one is crucial for the purposes of

insubordination, which indicates that a basic kind of plasticity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for power's resistance: thought is needed to supplement plasticity (but, then again, plasticity underlies thought).

The idea that there might be something “of the body” and yet beyond power, or at least not thoroughly constituted by power—namely, plasticity—looks incompatible with Butler's framework, at least as she herself understands it. I have been suggesting, however, that refusing to acknowledge this corporeal element makes it impossible to fully theorize the subject's resistance to power, or the movement whereby power turns on itself, which, for Butler, is the same phenomenon, differently described. This is a process she is positively invested in, and it is a plastic process. I would go as far as to say that the possibility of insubordination is the real impetus for her discourse. She would not be able to renounce it and still proceed. Reading Butler and Malabou together, then, has made it possible for a prediscursive form of plasticity to come into sight as a crucial, if abjected, element within Butler's thinking.

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Notes

1 This idea forms part of the background of Sandra Bartky's Foucauldian essay on the relation between power and the production of femininity, for instance (see Bartky 1990). Natalie Stoljar appeals to a similar idea to argue for a substantive theory of autonomy, as opposed to a procedural and hence content-neutral theory of autonomy: “In certain cases, even preferences satisfying the standards of critical reflection that are required by procedural accounts would still be regarded as nonautonomous by many feminists. This is because such preferences are influenced by pernicious aspects of the oppressive context” (Stoljar 2000, 95).

2 “[I]f we contrive to believe in a certain efficacy of the center (brain, machine . . .) that is perhaps because power—which hasn't been unified in a long time, as Foucault endeavored to show us—has every interest in our imagining it that way” (Malabou 2008, 40).

3 “Si je veux donc penser une plasticité non réductrice et non réductionniste je dois d'abord montrer ses possibles implications réductionnistes, c'est-à-dire politiques, idéologiques, économiques et sociales” (Malabou 2009, 218).

4 “If the heterosexual denial of homosexuality results in melancholia and if melancholia operated through incorporation, then the disavowed male homosexuality culminates in a heightened or consolidated masculinity, one which maintains the feminine [that is, an identification as feminine] as the unthinkable and the unnamable” (Butler 1990, 94).

5 Malabou points out that the loss that, according to Butler, is supposed to be involved in gender-formation would have to be constitutive of the object-relation that is supposed to be lost: Homosexual desire, which prohibition forces the subject to give up, does not preexist the gesture whereby it is given up, but comes into existence through that gesture (Malabou 2009, 203). If it did preexist its loss, Butler would have to concede something like a “predisposition” in the subject, even though she rejects the idea of masculine and feminine predispositions when it surfaces in the work of both Freud and Lacan. Malabou suggests that Butler's account of gender-identity-formation presupposes a subject predisposed to melancholic loss (210). Perhaps this rudimentary predisposition bears a relation to the form of rudimentary plasticity that Butler, as I argue in this essay, also has to presuppose in providing her account of insubordination.

6 “Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process that operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and *destabilized* in the course of this reiteration” (Butler 1993, 10; my emphasis).

7 “To ‘concede’ the undeniability of ‘sex’ or its ‘materiality’ is always to concede some version of ‘sex,’ some formation of ‘materiality’” (Butler 1993, 10).

8 I stress the ways in which Malabou and Butler’s reading of Hegel lends itself to Foucauldian reflections about the nature of subjection and insubordination, reflections that include the insight that we, and that our bodies, are always constituted by something “other”: both the body and subjectivity are thus what Butler would call “contested sites of ownership” (Butler 1997, 54), or are implicated in what she also calls a “crisis of the proper” (Butler and Malabou 2010, 101). Catherine Kellogg provides an alternative reading of *Sois mon corps* that emphasizes the way the text helps us reflect on the relations that maintain between those who have property, in the form of land or in the form of their own bodies, and those subjects who are constituted as propertyless (Kellogg 2017).

9 In fact, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler suggests that it is Hegelian theory that first makes it possible to entertain both the idea that Foucauldian subjection requires the subject’s attachment to its own subjection and the idea that this attachment might be a self-negating attachment, an attachment that simultaneously functions as subjection’s “constitutive failure and [a] potential site of resistance” (Butler 1997, 62). The Foucauldian account of subjection, her suggestion is, while moving beyond dialectical logic, nevertheless inherits certain Hegelian formulations.

10 At one point, Butler even explicitly aligns “plasticity” with Foucauldian subject-constitution, telling us that plasticity implies the creation and dissolution of forms, on the one hand, and a condition, on the other, this condition being that we are constituted by forces other than those that are “proper” to us (Butler and Malabou 2010, 58). If we read this statement alongside her text on Hegel in *The Psychic Life of Power* (see Butler 1997, chap. 1), then we should conclude that the subject’s insubordinate change can be construed on the model of corporeal “plasticity” as well.

11 Butler: “[I]l existe une zone de rencontre et de répulsion, que l’on pourrait même appeler *la vie du corps*, qui consiste dans le mouvement contraire d’une propulsion *vers* et *loin* de la conservation de soi comme telle” (Butler and Malabou 2010, 101; emphases in the original).

12 Malabou: “Cependant, à la toute fin de la *Phénoménologie de l’esprit*, un détachement suprême, présenté comme l’absolu’ lui-même, intervient . . . La forme du ‘moi’ explose et se dissout” (Butler and Malabou 2010, 53).

13 Malabou: “Le ‘soi’ foucauldien semble ainsi être constamment ‘auto-affecté’ par sa propre forme, même s’il ne connaît pas sa forme à venir. Le soi s’affecte lui-même en se formant . . . Dans tous les cas, le soi ne se perd pas, il est lié à lui-même” (Butler and Malabou 2010, 93).

14 Jarius Grove worries that the kind of oblivion that explosive plasticity implies undermines the possibility of resistance to contemporary forms of power in a different way. The fact that human beings can be explosively plastic—the fact that “our life can go on without us” (Grove 2015, 238)—opens up “the possibility of designing or steering subjects that have no index of what they were before, such that something could resist. [It] represents the possibility of frictionless change . . . that would leave no trace of what could be called an alternative [for example, an alternative form of living]” (239). Jacques Derrida remarks upon a similar danger related to explosive change: In attempting to leave a closure—and this is of course deconstruction’s task—by simply changing terrain “in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion,” by “brutally placing oneself outside,” by “affirming an absolute break and difference,” one risks “inhabiting more naively and more strictly than ever” the closure one believes one has left behind (Derrida 1982, 135). One risks reinstating “the new terrain on the oldest ground” (135). Malabou’s emphasis on explosive plasticity in her own discourse is especially interesting in light of the fact that Derrida was her supervisor. At times Malabou emphasizes plasticity’s explosive dimension precisely in order to break with deconstruction (see Malabou 2010; 2011).

15 Butler: “Mais même si l’on n’échappe jamais absolument ou complètement à l’attachement à soi, ceci n’implique pas immédiatement que ce dernier soit plus originaire que le détachement” (Butler and Malabou 2010, 99–100).

16 “The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire [a desire that Foucault glosses as the desire to formulate sexual identity in its truth], but bodies and pleasures” (Foucault 1990, 156–57).

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