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Precarious Attachments: A Critical Reading of Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997)

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Abstract

Grounded in a close reading of Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), this essay offers a critical intervention into her notion of "passionate attachment" and the a-priori, ontological assumptions that underwrite it. Instead of treating an infant's relation to its earliest objects of attachment as empirically demonstrable, Butler provides little explicit warrant for this premise, thereby introducing a latent transcendental tension into the theory. The later discussion of "melancholy," furthermore, does not so much extend the logic of attachment as expose a generative structure of negation that sits uneasily alongside the affirmative logic of attachment. By tracing the double movement and turning-points of attachment and melancholy in subject formation, I clarify the subtle moments within Butler's argument and explore critical pathways for re-thinking agency inside the triadic structure of power–attachment–melancholy/anger.

Keywords

subjection; attachment; subjectivity; feminism; queer; melancholy

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Preface: The Psychological Dynamics of Power

Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, published in 1997, occupies a pivotal yet often underappreciated place in her intellectual trajectory. Early critiques claimed that "the underlying thesis of this book is the superiority of homosexuality through the argument that homosexuality is the primordial human condition" (Hartle, 1998). Without question, such remarks are in many ways reductive—especially considering that the book devotes substantial space to a sustained critical engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian theory in order to probe how power operates psychically to produce the subject. Still, there is a partial truth to this critique: Butler does indeed introduce—without much argumentation—the idea that the infant's earliest erotic relation (to parent, guardian, or sibling) provides the ontological foundation for survival, and she extends this premise to posit a constitutive link between attachment and persistence. In doing so, she gestures toward a latent primacy of homosexual desire—one that is less empirically established than it is structurally assumed (Campbell, 2001).

That said, at its core *The Psychic Life of Power* offers a sustained theoretical analysis of subject formation by drawing together social theory, philosophy, and psychoanalysis in a novel way—an analysis that was only implicit in Butler's earlier works such as *Bodies That Matter*(1993) and *Gender Trouble* (1990). While revisiting and revising some of her earlier positions—most notably, the theory of gender performativity—Butler also opens up entirely new domains of inquiry. The book provides a political account of subject formation in which psychoanalysis serves as a key theoretical tool. As one

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critic remarked, it may not be Butler's "most famous" work, but it is undoubtedly essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the full range of her thought. In many ways, the book extends the concerns of *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, yet now turns more explicitly to the question: if the voluntary agent is dead, how is the subject nonetheless formed?

As Amy Allen (2008) observes, Butler foregrounds the dynamic interaction between psyche and sociality, positioning the subject precisely at their point of intersection. Allen further argues that Butler's use of psychoanalytic categories, far from clashing with Foucauldian critique, actually furnishes a model for Foucault's own method. Veronica (2010) similarly contends that Butler sketches a project in which Foucault (politics) and Lacan (psychoanalysis) converge. This theoretical innovation enriches our understanding of subject production while equipping critical theory and feminist thought with sharper analytic tools.

The significance of this theoretical innovation lies in the fact that it not only deepens our understanding of subject formation but also furnishes new analytic tools for both critical theory and feminist thought. As scholars like Alan McKinlay (2010) have noted, Butler's engagement with these intellectual traditions aims to offer a historicized account of identity politics, one that avoids the twin pitfalls of rigid structural determinism and voluntarism. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, this ambition becomes more theoretically explicit, especially through her elaboration of the concept of "passionate attachment" (p.6), which offers a fresh lens on the contradictions and paradoxes that shape contemporary working identities.

In sum, *The Psychic Life of Power* marks a crucial turning point in Butler's theoretical development, forming a bridge between her early work on gender performativity and her later writings on ethics and politics. The book not only extends her long-standing concern with subject formation, but also, through the introduction of a psychoanalytic dimension, offers a unique insight into how power operates at the deepest psychic levels. Though often overshadowed by the influence of *Gender Trouble*, this work is in fact indispensable for understanding the broader architecture of Butler's thought. A close reading of the text, along with an analysis of the tensions that underlie it, is thus essential not only for grasping Butler's intellectual project, but also for mapping the contours of feminist theories of power more broadly.

II. The Paradoxical Birth of the Subject: Passionate Attachments to Power

Like Althusser, Butler interprets subjection as both the precondition and the very process through which a subject is formed. In subjection, the individual—following Althusser's formulation—suffers under the domination of an external power, yet must pass through that very domination in order to emerge as a subject. In other words, power not only oppresses the individual in a coercive, external fashion, but also provides the conditions for the subject's existence and shapes the trajectory of its desire. It is precisely at this critical juncture that Butler offers one of her most compelling arguments: the subject develops a "passionate attachment" to the very power that subjugates and injures it—because that power is also what makes existence possible. This attachment is not a matter of voluntary choice; it is a psychic effect generated by the operations of power itself, one of its most insidious productions.

Because attachment operates as the psychic pre-condition of subject-formation, Butler insists that without a fervent attachment to the agent of domination, there can be no subject at all. This bond is propelled less by rational choice than by the drive to survive: to exist at all the subject must acquiesce to disciplinary regimes and systems of recognition. In Butler's oft-quoted formulation, "*I would rather exist in subordination than not exist"* (p.7). This embrace of power—which is not the same as straightforward internalization—unfolds in the "*form of love*" (p.23). Subjection, then, does not unfold as a dispassionate acceptance; it takes the form of an erotic, affect-laden investment. Hence the birth of the subject is structured by paradox: power endows the subject with an illusion of autonomy—*I choose to attach*—while simultaneously stripping that autonomy away. The subject is wounded by power and yet clings to it with genuine ardors.

To unravel this seemingly paradoxical—almost masochistic—logic of attachment, Butler turns to Hegel, her philosophical touchstone, rereading the section on the "unhappy consciousness" in the Phenomenology of Spirit. Drawing on the master-slave dialectic, she shows how the slave, through labor and service to the master or any figure of authority, secures a sense of being. In Butler's reading, Hegel's "unhappy consciousness" names a split subject: consciousness venerates a supreme Other (the

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master, God), yet simultaneously recognizes its own lowliness, generating shame and guilt. Pursuing Hegel's lead, Butler sharpens the role of what Hegel calls "absolute fear" (p.39)—a dread of non-being that is, in effect, an absolute thirst for existence. From this fear the subject acquires an attachment to law. In other words, the flight from radical anxiety crystallizes into a normative framework that, in turn, shapes the subject. Subjection, then, never fully annihilates the self; rather, enduring self-negation harbors a perverse self-affirmation. Butler stresses the body's centrality: moral injunctions aim to conquer fear by negating the body, yet the very act of suppression ends up preserving and fortifying corporeality under a twisted logic of protection. Ultimately, attachment describes the subject's inability to relinquish its dependency on the power that dominates it, even when that dependency entails oppression and pain. The tie is at once somatic and affective, revealing how power becomes inextricably woven into the subject's libidinal economy.

Beyond attachment as the foundational psychic mechanism, Butler turns to Nietzsche and Freud to clarify how *internalized punishment* shapes the subject's later "psychic life." She summarises Nietzsche's claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: "bad conscience" arises when humanity, adapting to social life, drives its aggressive instincts inward—cruelty, denied external release, recoils upon the will itself, generating inner pain and guilt. Freud's account of the superego traces a parallel dynamic: out of fear *and* love for external authority (parents, social norms), the individual installs prohibitive rules as conscience, which then punishes the self from within. Linking the two, Butler argues that what looks like an external power is re-situated inside the subject through these psychic circuits; the subject is produced by a looping process of self-directed accusation, sustained by perpetual guilt. Crucially, "internalisation" here does not mean a pre-existing self simply absorbs outer norms; rather, the subject *is* the very effect of this inward turn of punishment. In short, the subject's unity and continuity rest on an unending inner voice of conscience and blame.

This entire series of psychic mechanisms—guilt, morality, conscience—is also what Butler sees as inadequately addressed in Foucault's theory of discipline and Althusser's account of interpellation, though this critique remains open to contestation. In her view, a purely discursive or (post-)structuralist analysis of power falls short of explaining why the subject *willingly* aligns itself with power. To do so, one must also examine the operations of unconscious desire and conscience. For example, Butler revisits Althusser's iconic scene: a police officer calls out "Hey, you!" and a passer-by turns around—thereby becoming a subject hailed into being by ideology. Butler accepts this framing, but then poses a deeper question: what compels the individual to turn? The act of responding to the call is not simply a mechanical, physiological reaction; it reflects an internal disposition and motivation. In her account, the subject turns because they already carry within themselves a predisposition to accept guilt—a felt, internalised sense of *having done wrong*. This is where conscience, or the affect of guilt, begins to operate. When the individual turns to face the voice of law or authority, that act of turning is simultaneously a gesture toward the law and a turning *against oneself*. The external summons becomes an internal voice, a ventriloquised command, through which the subject begins to self-regulate. This act of turning toward the law thus becomes indistinguishable from turning inward toward the self, and it is in this very movement that conscience takes form. In short, Butler argues that Althusser's scene of interpellation, while powerful, obscures the psychic dimension of power—a dimension through which power not only calls subjects into being but embeds itself as an internal force, shaping their desire to subject.

Although the psychic mechanisms of power may appear tightly sealed—although our entanglement with power may be marked by an unavoidable complicity—Butler insists on the dual character of power. While the emergence of the subject is inseparable from its subordination to power (this being the very precondition of subjectivation), the same process also gives rise to the possibility of resistance and reinterpretation—this is the source of the subject's agency. More specifically, Butler identifies this potential for liberation in the concept of "resignification" (p.94). Resignification refers to the subject's capacity to alter the meaning of established norms through their repetition with a difference, thereby transforming the very structure of power. This idea draws from Foucault's theory of micro-political resistance, but is developed further through Butler's own account of performativity—what some scholars have described as "disrupting the functioning of power by displacing its performative operations" (Wang, 2016). On the one hand, the subject is not self-originating; the normative frameworks of power precede and delimit its emergence. But on the other hand, the subject is never wholly passive—it always retains some margin of maneuver to reinterpret

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the discourses and norms it is given. Drawing on Freud's discussion of compulsive repetition, Butler argues that even within submission there lies the potential for resistance: because compliance is always marked by a certain incompleteness—no subject can perfectly embody the norm—this very imperfection opens up space for transformation. As the subject reiterates the norm, it may shift or displace its meaning, thereby producing new significations or subject positions. This dislocation—this performative slippage—renders the body mobile, unstable, and thus potentially subversive. In Butler's words, it enables "those who have been abjected as Others to seek a critical subversion of gender norms through the performative citation or repetition of those very norms" (Wu, 2018), engaging in a bodily resistance without a pre-existing subject. In fact, resignification, which was continuously deepened in Butler's early and middle works, occupies an important position in this book because it suggests the dynamics of how agency manifests itself in a seemingly non-passive way in a real dilemma that has been suppressed by a structured power matrix. Therefore, it actually answers how the attaching subject can still lead to a certain possibility of liberation in the process of "conspiracy".

III. The Tension between the Affirmative Structure of Attachment and the Negative Structure of Melancholy

The Psychic Life of Power appears to stage a theoretical tension that warrants close attention: the psychic mechanism of attachment, so central in the book's earlier chapters, seems to undergo a transformation in the latter half—especially in the discussion of gendered melancholy. This shift suggests a latent redirection in the object of analysis. In the case of heterosexual melancholy, the object of attachment is no longer, as previously emphasized, a structurally affirmative emotional investment in power itself, but rather an unfinished internalization of a lost object of desire (typically, a same-sex love interest). Here, the meaning of attachment to power becomes more complex and indirect. It is clear that neither the object of same-sex desire nor the excluded queer subject can be equated with power or its proxy. Rather, they are the results of power's structural operations, not its representatives. While Butler asserts that melancholia is a kind of attachment that substitutes for one that has been shattered, lost, or rendered impossible, the emotional texture of this *impossible* or *negative* attachment differs significantly from the affirmative attachment posited at the outset (p. 190). This distinction—between attachment to the effects of power and direct attachment to power itself—forms a crucial site for unpacking the book's internal tension. Moreover, the dominant psychic mechanism in these later discussions appears to shift from the affirmative register of attachment to the negative structure of melancholy. The relation and transition between these two affective logics—one grounded in generative, even if ambivalent, attachment, and the other rooted in loss, negation, and foreclosure—deserve sustained and careful examination.

At the very beginning of the book, Butler sketches an argument premised on a clear a priori assumption about affective dynamics: the force that injures the subject is not purely repressive, but also productive. It seduces, deceives, or commands the subject into forming an attachment to it—precisely because that force constitutes the very condition of the subject's existence. This proposition marks a significant departure from traditional theories of the subject. However, when Butler turns to the mechanisms of gender identity and melancholy, her analytic emphasis clearly shifts toward a different structural dynamic. In this later development, the direct emotional dynamics through which power elicits attachment from the subject seem to recede, raising questions about whether "attachment to power" retains the central theoretical role it held at the outset. One could imagine, for instance, that even if power were cast as purely coercive—without allure, without ambiguity—the melancholic account of gender Butler develops would still hold. Thus, in her discussions of melancholy and rage, the central psychic mechanism appears to diverge from the earlier focus on attachment. Whereas the subject is initially described as formed through a passionate attachment to the very power that subjugates it, this later framing invites a reassessment: is such attachment still a necessary condition for the formation of melancholic identity? This question, in turn, prompts a reconsideration of the scope and flexibility of Butler's early theory of passionate attachment—its concrete application in later chapters, its potential transformation, and its general explanatory power.

To more fully grasp this theoretical tension, we must distinguish what Butler means by melancholy and how it differs from attachment. As a psychic mechanism, melancholy is not simply a feeling of sadness or grief. Drawing on Freud's theorization, Butler conceptualizes melancholy as an

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unacknowledged loss that is incorporated into the ego and becomes the foundation for identification. She politicizes and formalizes this structure, arguing that the formation of heterosexual identity is predicated on the denial and internalization of same-sex desire, such that an unspeakable sorrow—melancholia—becomes the psychic ground of gendered being. The heterosexual subject is constructed on the loss of a disavowed love object. In a heteronormative regime, same-sex desire is often forcibly prohibited. Because this desire cannot be openly acknowledged, it is diverted into a melancholic mechanism in which the individual internalizes the love for a same-sex figure as part of their egoic structure—while simultaneously being compelled to deny that such love ever existed. Yet this identity remains haunted by a ghostly trace, because it harbors a love that was lost but never mourned. Through this structure of negation, gender identity comes to appear as a naturalized, heterosexual formation. Butler further suggests that gender itself may be understood as a melancholic fantasy of incorporation, whereby the forbidden object of identification is swallowed into the self as a means of refusing its loss. Masculine or feminine identities are thus often constructed through the exclusion and unconscious preservation of certain desires or identifications. In other words, structural power must continually—whether consciously or unconsciously—underscore the parts it excludes and prohibits (same-sex desire) in order for the permitted parts (heterosexual desire) to acquire meaning.

Melancholy, in Butler's account, becomes intimately linked with rage. When an object of desire or attachment is prohibited or lost due to the workings of power—and when that loss cannot be publicly mourned—the subject internalizes the traces of that object, along with the love for it and the rage it provokes. Unspoken grief mutates into buried anger; and because this anger cannot be directed outward (either because the object has vanished or because anger itself is socially repressed), it accumulates within the subject and turns aggressively inward. Butler points out that if social norms further suppress the expression of anger, this internal circuit of melancholy and rage can spiral into intense self-destructive impulses, even suicidal tendencies. Conscience itself becomes "the angry Other" within the subject: resentment toward the external other is redirected and refashioned as a voice of conscience, a disciplinary force now lodged in the subject's psychic interior. In this sense, the subject is perpetually caught in a struggle with itself.

In short, melancholy marks a negational structure of subject formation, wherein the forbidden desire or love—used as the basis for reflexive self-identification—cannot be acknowledged as loss and therefore cannot be grieved. This ungrieved love becomes the foundation for structural melancholy. The emphasis of melancholy theory lies not in the subject's emotions per se, but in the social mechanisms of exclusion and prohibition—how certain desires and attachments are disallowed, forcing the subject to *become* something through negation. Yet Butler's reliance on Freudian concepts also reveals tensions within the theoretical architecture she inherits. On one hand, the subject emerges under prohibition, coming into being through the foreclosure of possible identifications—a notion familiar from structuralist and psychoanalytic traditions (from Lacan to Althusser, and even in Foucault's later writings). While Butler resonates with these traditions, her distinctive contribution lies in how she retools and integrates these concepts in the service of new critical aims. On the other hand—and more centrally—the tension between the affirmative structure of attachment and the negational structure of melancholy becomes a key fault line in Butler's theory. As she elaborates the latter in greater detail, her direct engagement with "attachment" as the psychic foundation of subjection appears to recede, prompting a reconsideration of how the two affective mechanisms relate. Ultimately, by recasting melancholy in Freudian terms as a structurally embedded node within social formation, Butler offers a compelling critique of gender normativity—while also exposing the conceptual difficulty of reconciling the psychic logic of melancholy with that of attachment. The complexity of this relationship, and the theoretical challenge of aligning the two, remains one of the most generative tensions in her work.

In seeking a deeper understanding of the continuity and transformation of Butler's theory of attachment, we might ask whether the tension evident in her argument could be read as follows: the attachment to the prohibited object ultimately requires mediation through complex psychic detours, whereby it becomes redirected or associated with the very social structure or power network that instituted the prohibition—thus sustaining, however indirectly, a form of attachment to the order of power itself. Within the psychoanalytic tradition on which Butler draws, this idea of transference is indeed present. For example, in Freud's account of the formation of the superego, the subject redirects both love and hatred for the father toward an internalized moral authority, resorting to self-punishment

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as a way of preserving the father's image. Yet this form of psychic redirection differs markedly in both nature and affective logic from the passionate attachment Butler introduces at the beginning of her book—a productive and affirming libidinal investment in power itself, even under conditions of subjugation. The generative potential implied by passionate attachment contrasts with the melancholic mechanism, which Butler later unpacks as one deeply marked by loss, denial, and internal violence. These represent distinct affective registers—one affirmatively sustaining the subject's being through power, the other disclosing how identity is haunted by disavowed desires and ungrieved losses.

From an analytical standpoint, Butler's theory appears to be navigating between two interpretive routes. On one hand, if she were to fully commit to the immediate and affirmative psychic dynamic of attachment as laid out in the book's opening, she would need to offer a more sustained account of how power continues to seduce and draw in the subject—not merely dominate it—in order to maintain this affective structure of "love." On the other hand, in her concrete analysis of gender identity, where power often operates through prohibition, erasure, and foreclosure, she pivots toward an elaboration of melancholic mechanisms. This move signals a shift toward a more negative, trauma-inflected, but still productive psychic logic. Seen in this light, *melancholy* and *rage* function not as rejections of the attachment thesis, but as its contextual extensions and intensifications, adapted to specific formations of power. They illustrate not a linear unfolding but a thickening of the theoretical terrain. This evolution in focus may also help explain the trajectory of Butler's later works—such as *Undoing Gender* and *Frames of War*—which turn toward questions of ethics, grievability, and universal vulnerability. In those texts, "attachment" no longer serves as the central theoretical anchor it does at the outset of *The Psychic Life of Power*, but becomes one part of a broader inquiry into how subjects are made, unmade, and mourned within the infrastructures of power.

Butler attempts to show that the economy of desire must be founded on refusal, forgetting, and exclusion—in other words, that meaningful boundaries require the expulsion of certain "infinite elements" beyond their limits. Yet does our yearning for the existence conferred by juridical power always outweigh the terror and grief of the price it exacts—namely, the erasure of our possibilities? Is absolute fear truly so absolute that we are willing to swallow lesser fears in order to preserve existence itself? If so, how might we generalize this BDSM-like attachment to pain (even though Butler briefly touches on BDSM in this book, she moves past it rather hastily)? And if not always, then where is the boundary—how much melancholy and rage, and under what politicized conditions, are needed to provoke a critical reflection on, or even rebellion against, this attachment? In any case, Butler does not attempt to resolve this tension. She treats melancholy as a deformation or subsidiary mechanism of attachment, rather than as something potentially in conflict with it—or even as a political resource that might be turned outward, against the structure of power itself, rather than repressed back into the subject. Such a view functions more as a priori presumption than as a fully articulated argument.

Coda: The Unsayable "Before the Subject"

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler repeatedly circles—but never fully articulates—a question that both philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions have long sought to evade: what is the subject before subjectivation? Can a pre-subjective mode of being be thought, let alone spoken? This is not merely a temporal question, nor simply a genealogical inquiry into the origin of normative structures. As Butler herself puts it, *"we cannot return to a pre-subjective state of existence."* What seems like a chicken-and-egg problem is, in fact, a more radical challenge: have we ever been—or could we ever become—otherwise?

Across the history of structuralist and post-structuralist thought, this question resists resolution. For Butler, the "before the subject" does not constitute an experienceable or nameable state of being. As she notes in the book's introduction, the subject is produced as continuous, visible, and socially legible—but always *"haunted by an inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation"* (p. 29). This non-assimilable remainder gestures toward something power can neither fully capture nor exhaust. It functions less like a recoverable ground than like a philosophical black hole—a site sustained only through discursive deferral, psychic displacement, and political occlusion. It is, in short, an unspeakable residue, which persists at the edge of intelligibility.

Many philosophers within this lineage have, each in their own way, confronted the absence at the heart of the "before the subject." For instance, Lacan invokes the Real to name a domain that exists outside of—or resists—symbolization. The Real belongs to the pre-linguistic, pre-mirror stage of

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subject formation and represents the traumatic kernel structurally excluded from the subject's emergence. It functions as the remainder that the symbolic order can never fully capture, pointing to a dimension prior to the subject's full articulation within language, and thus marks a limit beyond which power cannot entirely regulate. Althusser, by contrast, begins his analysis at the moment the individual is transformed into a subject, leaving the pre-subjective state as an unexamined theoretical presupposition. His concern lies more with the mechanisms and consequences of interpellation than with any inquiry into what precedes it.

Within this theoretical architecture, the unsayable paradoxically becomes a source of political and philosophical potentiality. Borrowing Agamben's language, one might say that Butler is not interested in restoring a subject supposedly deprived of its wholeness by power. Rather, she draws attention to the unmobilized field of potential that resides in dispossession itself—a life form not yet realized, a mode of being still inarticulable. In these denied desires, unfinished griefs, and unnamed existences lingers a form of life that resides within norms yet exceeds them, not entirely legible to the order it inhabits.

Thus, rather than offering a theory of an originary subject, Butler refuses and displaces such a gesture. Instead, she encourages us to look for the fissures within subjection, to dismantle the psychic machinery of power by tracing its conditions of attachment. What makes the "before the subject" significant is precisely its resistance to fixation and closure. It always gestures toward an unsettled future, a possibility beyond the normative forms of life. It is in this unspeakable lacuna, this deferred and indeterminate space, that resistance can be reimagined, and being itself opened to other, as-yet-unfolded horizons.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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