

1-1-2011

## Radical Uncertainty: Judith Butler and a theory of character

Shady E. Cosgrove

*University of Wollongong*, [shady@uow.edu.au](mailto:shady@uow.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cosgrove, Shady E.: Radical Uncertainty: Judith Butler and a theory of character 2011.  
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers/196>

**University of Wollongong**

**Dr Shady Cosgrove**

**Radical Uncertainty: Judith Butler and a theory of character**

Abstract:

This paper will develop a theory of character based on Judith Butler's ideas of subjectivity and gender construction. It will summarise Butler's position and explore the practicalities of reading realist characters as performative repetitions. Then, it will discuss Butler's notion of agency and the subversive repetition, and how realist characters can demonstrate the radical uncertainty inherent in Butler's notion of agency – specifically when texts are rewritten in such a way that characters 'question' their 'original' depictions. The example of interest here will be Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in relation to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, with particular attention paid to the character of Antoinette/Bertha. I will argue that reading for instances of Butlerian agency is an ethical enterprise because it disrupts humanist assumptions regarding character. Finally, despite the inherent problematics of assuming an intentioning subject in this context, I ask writers and readers to consider hidden narratives within narratives in light of an ethics of representation.

Biographical Note:

Dr Shady Cosgrove is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. Her book *She Played Elvis* was shortlisted for the 2007 Australian/Vogel Literary Prize and published by Allen and Unwin in 2009. Her short fiction has been published in *Southerly*, *Antipodes*, *Hecate* and *Best Australian Short Stories*.

Keywords:

Fictional character – Judith Butler – subjectivity – performativity– agency– literature.

## Introduction

Structuralists have been quick to dismiss the character as a product of the text, nothing more than a series of repeating signs. As literary theorist Roland Barthes asserts: ‘When identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created’ (1970: 67). I appreciate this stance was adopted in part as a reaction to a pre-structuralism that pitted the character as a romantic representation of the liberal humanist subject. However this dismissal fails to take into account the role that character plays for many readers and the affective power that fictional characters can have. Emotional responses to fiction and the characters therein have attracted much recent academic attention across many fields (by theorists such as philosopher Susan Feagin [2009], narratologist Suzanne Keen [2006], feminist theorist and writer Molly Hite [2010] and literary theorist Dorothy Hale [2007] to name a few).

However, anyone considering the character as a representation of the human subject is relying on assumptions of what the human subject is. As literary theorist James Phelan notes:

Silently underlying this discussion of the mimetic component (of the fictional character) are some messy problems. First, all this talk about characters as plausible or possible persons presupposes that we know what a person is. But the nature of the human subject is of course a highly contested issue among contemporary thinkers (Phelan, 1989: 11)

The idea that fictional characters are read as ‘people’ is fundamental to many interrogations of character and a viable theory of character must take into account the influence of the mimetic, or how characters are constructed as ‘imitation people’. But as Phelan illustrates the notion of reading characters as ‘people’ is problematised in light of the complex nature of the human subject. If we can’t agree on the nature of the human subject, how can we agree on the nature of a representation of the human subject?

In this paper, I propose a theory of character using Judith Butler's work on subjection as a means to explore the complexity of character in light of the ‘messy problem’ of the mimetic. I then explore Butler’s notion of agency and how this impacts on a Butlerian reading of character. I call for reading and writing that keeps in mind the radical uncertainty of character, something illustrated by characters who appear in multiple texts such as *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha who becomes Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (or vice-versa). Rewriting fictional characters in this context can be an ethical enterprise, of interest to those concerned with issues of representation and political subversion.

### Butler’s gendered subjectivity: performative repetitions and agency

Intentional or not, Butler's work examines notions which link with literary characters – like identity formation, subjection, repetition and language. In her early work (especially her pivotal 1990 text *Gender Trouble*) Butler grapples with the idea of the performative and how it fashions the gendered subject. In that text, Butler uses

examples of gender to illustrate how the subject is formed through a series of repetitions that offer the effect of a consistent and unified self. Gender, for Butler, is achieved through repeated acts, where the acts themselves actually constitute the gendered subject instead of expressing it. Any idea of a consistent self that could choose to enact his/her identity whimsically violates the very concepts that Butler espouses (hence, I can't decide to be a man and subvert my identity).

Such acts, gestures, enactment, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (1990: 173).

The acts and gestures themselves, the fabrications, are created and continued through corporeal and discursive means, that is, through the body and/or through language. Examples of gendered performative acts and gestures include things as superficial as applying make-up or entering the women's toilets. These acts compile, producing a gendered sense of identity for the subject. Butler argues that our ideas of gender and our ideas of self are fashioned through these repetitions. We are not people who then repeat things, these repetitions are what create us as people.

So for Butler, the idea that 'one' exists, that Shady Cosgrove simply 'is' is an illusion. For Butler, there is no intrinsic self (as developed in *Gender Trouble* [1990], discussed in *Bodies that Matter* [1992] and revisited again when *Gender Trouble* was republished in 1999 with a new introduction). There is no core gender or a core self. The structural frame of obligatory reproductive heterosexuality offers the notion of this core as an illusion that hides the self as a series of performative repetitions. However, while the subject is fashioned by them, that is not to say she is determined by them. As Butler says:

The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects . . .* (1990: 185)

Because the repetitions which form the subject's identity never finish, gender identity is never secured. The ongoing nature of the performative repetition, the 'regulated process of repetition' is not fixed, that is, the subject is not entirely at the mercy of the structures that regulate gender-legitimizing norms. Because the norm can never be fulfilled completely, because there will always be norms which 'are and are not realizable' (1990: 126), gender can only be approximated. For Butler, being gendered will always be unstable. The category of man or woman will be shrouded in ambivalence because the norm can never fully determine the subject. Because the norm is dependent on repeating – resignifying – to fulfill the performative repetition, and because the norm can never be fully realized, there is room for these norms to be subverted. This is the crux of Butler's notion of agency.

For Butler, agency is radically different from the western liberal concept of agency that sees an agent intend to accomplish something and then do so. Butlerian agency is much more tenuous; it exists when a repetition of the subject mutates or deforms subversively, exposing its construction. As Butler states: “‘agency’ ... is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition’ (1990: 185). The example Butler offers is that of drag and how the drag queen can reproduce femininity in a way that exposes its construction. That is, if a man dresses as a woman or a woman dresses as a man ‘one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the “reality” of gender’ and the introduced gender is somehow ‘artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion’ (1990: xxii). The idea that there is a *real* gender under the illusion is questioned:

(t)he moment in which one’s staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees... [w]hen such categories come into question ... we come to understand that what we take to be ‘real’, what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality (1990: xxiii)

The subversive repetition is constituted by the idea that there is no *reality*, that the supposedly natural *reality* of femininity is produced. When repetitions build on one another, they seem not to be repetitions at all, but rather the actions of a consistent and unified self. Agency exists when this radical uncertainty is exposed.

### **Reading the fictional character as a subversive repetition**

My argument here is that the realist fictional character, like the human subject, can be read as a series of repetitions, which secures its ‘identity’. The character is signified, written, through its construction in language. The character is built through a series of incidents that repeat and resignify who the character is, reminiscent of the gendered subject who repeats and resignifies the norms of gender. The character of Jane is repeated throughout the text of *Jane Eyre*, first as a young girl who’s lost her parents, then as a governess who travels to Thornfield, then as a young woman travelling, etc. There are hundreds of incidents throughout the text that assert and reassert who ‘Jane Eyre’ is.

As reader response theory has documented, fictional characters can shift for readers – what we focus on in one reading may seem merely a detail in another. However there are limits to how far this transformative repetition can extend. Like the human subject who is signified through ‘*a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules*’ (Butler 1990: 185), the fictional character must also adhere to regulated processes of repetition. The fictional character of ‘Jane’ may seem earnest and hard-working to the reader or she may seem whiny and selfish. But wherever the reader's sympathies rest, she will be read as a series of repetitions that see her as a child in the Red Room, to arriving at Thornfield, to teaching Adele. ‘Jane’ is regulated by limitations: she is a woman, she is an orphan, she is a governess, etc. These limitations are a direct consequence of her creation. Any writer

writing in the realist mode writes a character that builds and grows on her previous depictions. While there can be an infinite number of responses to a character, the character is regulated by the author's choices and any repetition of character must take into account earlier repetitions of character. Certainly in realist circles, Jane Eyre could not turn into a rampaging wildebeest in the last chapter of the book.

If the realist fictional character can be read as a series of repetitions, it follows that when their construction is exposed or subverted, they can act as a site of Butlerian agency or radical uncertainty. But how can a realist character (as opposed to the reflexive postmodern character) draw attention to its construction within the limits of narrative? The character's role in a realist text circumvents drawing attention to itself as constructed. When I teach subjects in prose fiction, I implore students to draft and redraft their work to eliminate clunky mistakes – so readers can immerse themselves in the fictional world being established without being reminded of the text's construction. However, one way the realist fictional character can demonstrate agency is through texts that force readers to question previous character depictions: that is, rewriting. Authors can rewrite texts in the realist mode, creating a new series of repetitions that expose the constructed nature of character. Reading rewritten texts for repetition and subversion/agency involves analyzing and interrogating texts to see where they simply propagate existing structures and where they question and undermine those structures (structures in this case being monolithic story-telling, illusions of cohesive identities, gender paradigms, the 'novel', et cetera).

I would argue that Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a quintessential example of a rewritten text whose characters question their previous depictions and display Butler's notion of agency. Written in 1966, *Wide Sargasso Sea* chronicles the experiences of Bertha – the mad woman in the attic from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* – before she was incarcerated in Thornfield Hall. Rhys renames Bertha as Antoinette and details her life in the West Indies and early marriage to Edward Rochester (though Rhys chooses to unname him, taking away his patriarchal signifier). Bertha/Antoinette is comprised of a series of repetitions, which determine her character. In *Jane Eyre*, we first hear Bertha (though Jane and the first-time reader are not aware of her identity) through her laughter, via Jane Eyre's consciousness: 'While I paced softly on, the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh struck my ear' (Brontë, 122). Jane asks Mrs Fairfax, the housekeeper, whose laughter it is and is mollified (albeit reluctantly) that it belongs to the servant Grace Poole. The repetitions that comprise Bertha – more laughter, her attack on Mr Mason – climax when Jane discovers her in the attic, as Mr Rochester's wife: 'What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal' (Brontë, 328). The actual text devoted to Bertha in *Jane Eyre* is minimal. While she is a strategic symbol for Brontë's plot (she keeps Jane from achieving her desire for a romantic connection to Mr Rochester), her character is given little space within the text.

Jean Rhys's Antoinette is not a separate character from Bertha. She is an addition of repetitions to the character of Bertha. Even though Rhys is a different author from Brontë, the process of writing, or expanding upon, the character is not different. Rhys must adhere to the previous depictions of Bertha's character. That is, Rhys must write a believable continuation of who Bertha might be – otherwise readers will doubt it is the same character. Like the repetitions of gender, any reappropriation of Bertha is highly regulated in that it must, in some way, be linked to its previous depiction. The reappropriation is confined by the character it expands upon. Rhys can only rewrite Brontë's Bertha by keeping within the confines of who Bertha might believably be. However, simply because there are rules and regulations about who Bertha can be, does not mean that she is determined. By giving Bertha subject status and writing a self into the story of the mad woman in the attic, Rhys not only questions Brontë's version of Bertha but revolts against it. As Helen Tiffin states, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a 'canonical counter-discourse' that 'takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes' (1987: 22). Sylvie Maurel agrees: 'Retracing the genesis of her madness, Jean Rhys undertakes to emancipate Bertha from the debilitating straitjacket of stereotyped and nonplausible characterization' (1998: 152). By shifting and mutating the 'original' character, and privileging different stories than Brontë, Rhys is able to re-vision (in Adrienne Rich's sense of the word) the novel and question the monolithic story-telling of *Jane Eyre*.

It must be noted there are many narrative facets to Rhys' re-construction of Brontë's text that make Antoinette viable as a subversive repetition of Bertha and indeed I would argue that other characters (such as the nameless Rochester) who also question their previous depictions. I do not have space to elaborate fully here but matters such as the use of multiple perspectives, re-naming, temporal shifts and tone are critical to this enterprise as well as the developed characterization.

### **Ethics and a Butlerian theory of character: should we all rewrite texts?**

I have postulated that we can read fictional characters metaphorically in the way Butler reads the gendered subject. Further, I argue that this reading is an ethical enterprise because it disrupts humanist assumptions regarding character. The western liberal character can be compelling. I must admit, in earlier drafts of this paper, I was concerned with how we could use repetitions as a writerly tool in crafting characters and ended up propagating the very notions of western liberal selfhood that Judith Butler writes against. In a different vein, my creative writing students are drawn to the idea that characters 'come to them' and 'write themselves' – that planning plot points and character revelations is somehow counter to the creative project of novel writing. This attitude endows characters with a 'selfhood' that is capable of intention and action. Reading characters as Butlerian repetitions doesn't let the author (or reader) relax into this romantic view of character yet it still actively accounts for the mimetic component of realist fictional characters. Like the subject, the character's performative repetitions offer the illusion of a prior and volitional self, which is why

concepts of self-consciousness and ‘personhood’ must be taken into account in any viable theory of character.

So what are the practicalities of reading characters as Butlerian repetitions? Should we all stop creating characters and rewrite existing ones? Maybe we should commit to writing postmodern texts that draw attention to their constructions? I shy away from this strategy because the realist character is more compelling for me than the self-referential character because it mimics the illusion of a cohesive and unified self in a way that the postmodern character generally cannot. However it’s also important to remember that a rewritten character is not necessarily subversive. In fact, if not done carefully rewriting can run the risk of writing over silenced narratives. As well, it’s possible to rewrite a text and simply extend it rather than question it – such as Emma Tennant’s *Emma in Love* (1997) that chronicles Emma’s life two years after the Jane Austen novel finishes. Writing subversive characters is not simply a matter of changing authors, it’s about exposing the constructed nature of the fictional character and the narrative hegemony. Also, it’s not necessary to actually re-write a novel to consider, or re-consider, the representations of character therein. Thus, I ask writers and readers to ruminate on the narratives hidden within narratives. Of course I take on board that this is problematic (in light of assuming ‘intentioning selfhood’). That is, I’m making liberal assumptions about writers and readers. However I posit that this questioning can be read as a political act, especially in light of an ethics of representation.

### **In conclusion**

The idea of questioning dominant textual narratives is not new. However this paper has tried to shed light on why this process can be critical. By reading fictional characters as Butlerian gendered subjects, we don’t question the character as a sign of the subject, but rather the subject as its referent. Reading for agency, for the radical uncertainty of the realist character, reminds us that the illusion of a cohesive unified narrative, while seductive, is problematic especially in light of issues of representation.

## List of Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland 1970 *S/Z*, London: Jonathan Cape
- Benhabib, Seyla 1995 'Feminism and Postmodernism', in S Benhabib, J Butler, D Cornell, N Fraser (eds) *Feminist Contentions*, New York: Routledge
- Benhabib, Seyla. 1995 'Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics' in S Benhabib, J Butler, D Cornell, N Fraser (eds) *Feminist Contentions*, New York: Routledge
- Brontë, Charlotte 1996 *Jane Eyre*, London: Penguin Books
- Butler, Judith 1990 *Gender Trouble*, New York: Routledge
- Butler, Judith 1992 interviewed in *Art Forum*, November 1992, 84.
- Butler, Judith 1993 *Bodies that Matter*, New York: Routledge
- Butler, Judith 1997 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' in S Phelan (ed) *Playing With Fire*, New York: Routledge
- Feagin, Susan 2009 'The Rationality of Empathizing with Fictional Character' in *Autonomy of Reason*, Berlin: Lit Verlag
- Fraser, Nancy 1995 'False Antithesis: A Response to Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler' in S Benhabib, J Butler, D Cornell, N Fraser (eds) *Feminist Contentions*, New York: Routledge
- Hale, Dorothy 2007 'Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel', *Narrative*, 15.2, 187-206.
- Hite, Molly 2010 'Tonal Cues and Uncertain Values: Affect and Ethics in Mrs. Dalloway', *Narrative*, 18.3, 249-275
- 1989 *The Other Side of the Story*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- Keen, Suzanne 2006 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative*, 14.3, 207-236
- Maurel, Sylvie 1998 *Jean Rhys*, New York: St Martin's Press
- McNay, Lois 1999 'Subject, Psyche, and Agency', *Theory, Culture & Society* 16:2, 175-193.
- Messer-Davidow, Ellen 1995 'Acting Otherwise' in J Gardiner (ed) *Provoking Agents*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press
- Phelan, James 1989 *Reading People, Reading Plots*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Rhys, Jean 1966 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, London: Penguin
- Steele, Meili 1997 *Critical Confrontations*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press
- Tennant, Emma 1997 *Emma in Love*, London: Fourth Estate
- Tiffin, Helen 1987 'Post-Colonial Literature and Counter-Discourse', *Kunapipi*, 9.3, 17-34